

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Corinthians 1:10-18

*Corinthians 1:10-18: Divisions in the Church*

*<sup>10</sup> Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. <sup>11</sup> For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. <sup>12</sup> What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." <sup>13</sup> Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? <sup>14</sup> I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup> so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. <sup>16</sup> (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) <sup>17</sup> For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. <sup>18</sup> For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

One year when I was associate pastor at Conestoga Church of the Brethren, we had a talent show. I tried to think of an idea for something I could do and came up with an idea that was going to require some help; and I knew exactly whom to ask. I convinced my colleague, Del, his wife Lois, and of course, my husband, Don.

The plan was to do a skit about a husband and wife getting ready to go to church. Del played the husband, Chip, and I played the wife, Cookie. The interesting part of this skit was that our spouses were going to be behind us, with their arms through shirts we wore backwards. Del and I did not use our own hands to brush our teeth, shave, comb our hair, or put on make-up or aftershave. Our spouses did that for us, without being able to see what they were doing. All the while Del and I tried to have a conversation about church.

We had a blast practicing the skit. We laughed and laughed and laughed. We laughed so hard it looked like we were crying. Of course, when we did it for the congregation, I think the foundation of the church shook because everyone laughed hysterically.

One of the goals Del and I had as a team was to mentor, as a team, what it means to be brothers and sisters in Christ. That night, we mentored to our folks that it's alright for Christians to have fun, to play.

Back in October while doing my report at a meeting with the leadership team, I was asked about my observations of the congregation. I told them this is a hard-working, dedicated congregation with a servant's heart, which is a great thing. The next thing I said was that you need to learn to play a little more. I knew, of course, that having just lost your pastors was a real downer. But I also know, there are a lot of benefits for a congregation that plays together. So, I want to share some thoughts about this topic with all of you this morning.

I admit that the text that Don read for you this morning may sound a bit somber for the topic of play. But actually, it is a good place to begin as we explore the benefits of play.

Corinth was an important and wealthy city on the narrow strip of land separating Northern and Southern Greece. The Apostle Paul spent 18 months there on his Second Missionary Journey and established a church there. Acts 18 gives us considerable detail about Paul's work in Corinth during that time. At the conclusion of his visit to Corinth, Paul left to visit Ephesus, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Galatia.

The Christians in Corinth were struggling with their social surroundings. They lived in a community full of corruption and every imaginable sin, and they felt the pressure to adapt. The church was being destabilized by immorality and spiritual immaturity. The believers' faith was being tested, and some of them were caving-in and failing the test.

Paul wrote this letter while he was in Ephesus, in response to a report from Chloe's people about problems in the Corinthian church. Scholars speculate that Chloe might have been a businesswoman from Ephesus with agents who traveled to Corinth. However, she might have been from Corinth, and her people might have been family members rather than business associates. This is the only reference to Chloe in the New Testament, and we know nothing more about her—not even whether she was a Christian.

Paul took Chloe's information seriously about the problems arising in the church and addressed the problems through this letter. The people were bickering over their allegiances to different church leaders like Apollos and Cephas (or Peter as we know him). These allegiances were dividing the people.

Paul comes right out and says that his allegiance is to Christ and he asks, "Is Christ divided?" which is really an absurd question pointing out the obvious, of course. Christ is not divided. So then, if we are focused on Christ, neither should believers be divided. Paul said you must get along with each other. You must learn to be considerate of one another, cultivating a life in common.

I like this illustration from my Life Application that sheds a light of understanding for the point Paul was trying to make. It says in the footnote, "Like a frustrated coach watching his team bicker on the court, Paul called for a time-out. He saw the danger of divisions and arguments. The Corinthian believers' lack of unity was obvious. They may have been playing in the same 'uniform,' but they were doing as much as the opposition to bring about their own defeat.

"The problems weren't so much differences of opinions as divided allegiances. They were arguing over which position on the team was most important in a way that made them ineffective as a unit. They were on the field, but out of the game.

"Divisions between Christians work like brick walls and barbed-wire fences to undermine the effectiveness of the message that believers are to proclaim. Focus on your coach, Jesus Christ, and the purpose he has for you. Strive for harmony. Keep arguments about allegiances off the team."

This text invites us to consider: how do we do work at building harmony in the body of Christ? I'm not using this text today to focus on potential problems or divisiveness. Although, this text illustrates what can happen if we do not work at building harmony, even in times when things seem to be going smoothly.

I guess I should say a little something about the meaning of harmony. I really like using the word harmony better than unity to describe our life together. I believe harmony describes better what Paul is working at here. If we are living in harmony, we are respecting our differences, understanding one another, finding common ground, and coming together to make something beautiful happen as the body of Christ. Living together harmoniously in the body of Christ is not about demanding that groups have their own way.

This was something unique about the congregation I served at Fahrney-Keedy. We had many denominations and non-denominational churches represented in the congregation. Our differences never separated us or caused conflict. We delighted in the fact that we could worship together and love one another in spite of our differences. Of course, most of the congregants had

no other choice but to worship there if they wanted to worship, but the spirit of the group really was different and special.

Like other congregations where I served, my friends at Fahrney-Keedy played together. We build and strengthen our relationships with each other in the church as we worship together, work together, and play together. While I wasn't able to find the actual word "play" in the bible, the bible does address the topic of having fun.

In Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, we read, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; ...."

Ecclesiastes 8:15 – "And I commend joy, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun."

At the end of the story of the Prodigal Son, in Luke 15:23-24, we read that the father said, "'And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate."

We don't read the actual words anywhere that Jesus played, but we do know that Jesus ate meals with his disciples and others, and you cannot convince me that there never was laughter and fun as they ate together. And, we read in Matthew 19:14-15, when the little children were brought to Jesus, he said, "Let the children alone, don't prevent them from coming to me. God's kingdom is made up of people like these." Jesus also said in Matthew 18:3, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Now, one of the common traits among children is the fact that they play.

Most people know about the importance of play for children, but what about the importance of play for grown-ups? Some people think they are too old for play, but we're never too old to play. "The National Institute for Play believes that play can dramatically transform our personal health, our relationships, the education we provide our children and the capacity of our corporations to innovate." Research indicates that without play, it is hard to give our best at work or at home, or, I will add, at church. "Studies show that a life lived without play is at increased risk for stress-related diseases, mental health issues, addiction and interpersonal violence."

The benefits of play include vitality, energy, to the human body. The same is true for us as the body of Christ. When we play together, we energize all of our life together; it fuels our feeling of wanting to be together to engage in our worship, work and service that we do together.

Play generates optimism, seeks out freshness, makes perseverance fun and leads to understanding. It fosters empathy and promotes a sense of belonging and community.

It's no secret that we have among us some new people. We welcome them and we are very glad to have them with us. Some may continue to worship with us. Together this presents new and wonderful opportunities to help one another grow in our faith.

So then, along with engaging in play to refresh long-term adult-to-adult relationships, I suggest we create opportunities of play to foster these new relationships and nurture a feeling of belonging and community.

Playful communications and interactions, when nourished, produce a climate for easy connection and a deepening, more rewarding relationship, true intimacy. Why wouldn't we want

these kinds of relationships in our church? God made us for one another, and we need one another, so why not do what the bible tells us to do and nurture our relationships.

Play will help make us a healthier church. Then, if or when conflict arises, and perhaps, we are unable to find a common resolution, it will help us find peace in living together with our differences. Play also, will help make the times we come together for worship of our Creator God more meaningful, because of our deep intimate bond that we established with each other through play. And, play will energize us to work together in our common call of service in the name of Jesus, to each other, our neighbors, and our community.

Being a Christian does not mean that we cannot have fun. In fact, the bible encourages the opposite. Even as it calls us to accountability for living pure and holy lives, it does so, so that we can enjoy the rich blessings of life which God has given us. We should want all people to have the same opportunity to have this joy. Dull, lifeless, bitter, demanding, angry, divided people filling the pews in churches do not attract non-believers to join them, which is yet another reason to nurture who we are in Christ through the gift of play.

What kinds of things will we do to encourage play? My girlfriend told me that this weekend, my home church, the Lititz Church of the Brethren, was having an all-church scavenger hunt at the church. That's a unique idea. Meals like the Advent dinner and the eat-and-learn dinner we had recently are good ideas, along with progressive and mystery dinners , anything involving a meal is a great idea.

Game or movie nights, going somewhere together like, going to Sight and Sound in Lancaster, going camping or hiking, visiting a museum or going to a park, creating small groups: book clubs, scrapbooking, woodworking, cooking, are ideas, but there are so many creative good ideas for engaging in play. We should be finding ways to help our Sunday School classes, youth, young adults, and children to play.

So, where do we go from here? I say, my friends, it's time to make some plans, to set some goals that not only include serving others, spiritual growth, building repairs, youth ministry and the like, but also time for play. I guess that leaves me with just one more question today. Do you wanna play? I do. Amen.