

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

¹ And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people but rather as fleshly, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, ³ for you are still fleshly. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not fleshly and behaving according to human inclinations? ⁴ For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not all too human?

⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and each will receive wages according to their own labor. ⁹ For we are God's coworkers, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

Well, today is the big day. The day football fans look forward to because it's the day of the big game—the Superbowl. If football is not your game, you could probably care less about the game. Although, if you've been invited to a Superbowl party, you might be looking forward to being with friends and/or family; and you may be looking forward to some delicious party foods.

If you enjoy football, you've probably been cheering for a particular team throughout the season with hope that they would get into the big game. Of course, only two teams make it; and if your team is one of those teams, you are excited and maybe a little nervous for today's game. As many of you know, Don and I are big Eagles fans—always have been and always will be. We've spent many years cheering for a team that has not excelled, but they have remained our team. They face a very formidable opponent, one that I often times cheer for when they are playing against anyone but the Eagles.

One of the things I notice about teams that have successful seasons, they not only have good players on their team, but they also have a camaraderie that encourages a successful spirit, binding them together as a team with a spirit that encourages everyone to work hard and to do their best. Coaches for teams working well together often comment that their guys love and respect one another. They are a tight knit family.

You don't usually find them fighting on the sidelines when the game is not going well for their team. Instead, you find them trying to pump up one another's spirits, challenging one another to do their best. They comfort and encourage one another when someone makes a costly mistake.

I find it disappointing and discouraging when I see or hear about players striking out at their teammates, creating dissension among the team. Not only does it affect the efforts of the team badly, but it communicates a bad example to boys and young men playing the game on the midget level or junior, high school and college level, who are watching the game. In fact, it, presents to anyone watching the game, that it is acceptable behavior in all of life circumstances.

This morning we heard a portion of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, speaking about his disappointment with that church. They were divided, behaving like immature, undisciplined children. The dissension among them hinged on something that really was kind of silly. Paul

must have wondered how they would deal with big issues that might someday arise among them, if they couldn't even handle the smaller, needless issues.

This text follows the lessons that we looked at last week, focusing on spiritual nurturing. In this portion of Paul's letter, he goes a bit deeper into his discussion about the difference between mature and immature Christians. He's pretty clear about saying they were behaving quite immaturely. He told them they were like infants in the Christian life. The proof he cited was that they quarreled like children, allowing divisions to distract them.

What was the problem causing the division, you ask? It basically centered on who the members of the church felt was the better leader, teacher, preacher of the church; Paul or Apollos. Paul planted the church, feeding these new Christians with the basic teachings they needed to begin the journey of faith. Apollos was the one Paul left in charge to oversee the church and to build on the basics of the Gospel...hopefully feeding the members of the church spiritual food and growing them into mature spiritual Christians.

The dissention was over feelings of loyalty and preference to Paul or Apollos, which, as Paul said, was totally unnecessary. Paul made a case for the fact that he and Apollos were a team, working together to give the believers what they needed to grow in their faith. Paul was with them for the most basic of needs in the beginning; and Apollos was there, feeding them more solid teachings, to nurture them into a more mature faith. They both worked for God, and overall, God is the one who provided the growth.

Moreover, Paul tells them their dissention was not a spiritual matter, but a "worldly" matter. His message to them was that immature believers are worldly, meaning they are controlled by their own desires; and mature believers are in tune with God's desires. Their differences evolved out of worldly preferences, creating disunity in the body. Disunity discourages spiritual growth; and it discredits the witness of the church for spreading the Gospel.

Paul wrote this letter to call out and correct the acts of disunity that are being practiced by people who are supposed to be characterized by the guidance of the Spirit, and not human desires or worldly wisdom. Unfortunately, today, the church, across all denominations, is struggling with issues creating disunity, effecting the strengthening of its members' faith, and effecting its witness to those who so desperately need to hear the Gospel message.

The issues at the center of the divisions today range over a wide spectrum from the ridiculous to the most difficult theological challenges and understandings, from how to accomplish ministries, to whether women should be pastors, who can be a church leader, and of course, the issue of homosexuality. There are all kinds of things that can divide, and do divide, the church. And guess what, the world has us under a microscope, looking for direction, and watching to see how we will handle our differences. What are we to do?

If I were God, I might have all the answers each one of us seeks for every particular issue that troubles you, but I'm not, no one is. But Jesus, gives us the answer that can help us rise above our worries, arguments, even our divisions; if we are willing to leave behind our human desires and wisdom, and instead, embrace our spiritual bond and obedience to God's command. For some, the answer sounds too simplistic, and perhaps an avoidance to dealing with any one issue. Yet it is the wisdom of God that can guide us through our struggles with things that divide us.

Jesus teaches us that the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength; and going hand-in-hand with the greatest commandment is the second greatest commandment is to love others. Sound simplistic? Obviously not; because, as I see it, if it were simple, there would be no disunity. Where there is disunity, there is a reluctance to submit

to the requirements of obedience to these commandments. Love does not require us to all appreciate, like, agree on every single thing. That is not the witness of God's love given to us.

I want to bring to our attention two particular scriptures that tell us something about this love that binds us together. First is one that I preached on not too long ago, John 13:34-35. Jesus says to his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Now you may remember me saying that they already knew they were to love God and their neighbors as themselves. What made this command new was that it was directed to them as disciples and witnesses of the Gospel. He knew there would be disagreements that would rise among them, they already had, but they could not let those things get in the way of working together to spread the Gospel, nor would their witness of the Gospel be effective if they presented a front of disunity.

Loving one another was going to help them rise above their differences. Jesus was the example for them, and us. His little band of followers struggled with jealousy and other imperfections, and still Jesus loved them, stuck with them, and through his love for them, he fed them spiritual food that would grow their faith.

The same is true for us as Christ's disciples. Our love for one another will help us rise above our differences and encourage one another to grow in our faith. Through our obedience to this commandment, we can effectively communicate through our words and efforts to those outside of the church, that the world could be a better place, we could rise above our differences, by putting aside our attraction to human wisdom in order to embrace Godly wisdom leading us in love towards unity.

The other text gets viewed more often as a definition of love for a successful marriage. Indeed, it is that, and I too use it in weddings with this in mind. However, the context of the text tells us something different. The scripture I am talking about of course, is 1 Corinthians 13. Prior to this portion of scripture, Paul was speaking again about unity in the church, including at this point that everyone has gifts to be used in the church. Binding all of this together is the greatest gift, the gift of love. Let's listen to these words that describe love and the power of love. If you know them because you have heard them many times, listen carefully again and let them fill you anew with their meaning.

"¹ If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹² For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will

*see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.
13 And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love."*

Too simplistic, too easy of an answer for our struggles and differences, one might say. If so, then why is there so much that divides the church? Surrounding the description of love are verses that point out the temporal nature of many things that **we think** are very important. But the text points out that many of these things we value highly actually become the obstacles for loving one another and creating unity.

The command to love one another, in spite of our differences is the answer. Disregarding human wisdom is necessary. Human wisdom would have us claim we (individually) possess the only and the best plans for our particular church and its' ministries. Godly wisdom instead, would have us work together, using our various gifts to be the church, Christ's presence in our community in a variety of ways.

We cannot play God by insisting that we have all authority and understanding of the scriptures, because I hate to burst anyone's bubble, but Godly wisdom tells us we don't. There are things we may never totally understand until we meet God face to face.

There is more that goes into reading one verse before we claim it as an absolute, otherwise it may end up reflecting our own biases rather than God's truths. We need to study and listen together, and overall invite the Spirit's enlightenment on scripture. The Spirit does not, it does not, create division or anything that reflects the lack of love. At best sometimes, because of our human weaknesses, the Spirit can and does give us the ability to be patient, kind and respectful to one another, helping us to seek unity through the higher power of love that God commands us to live.

I won't lie to you and say this is easy. The Christian life was never guaranteed to be easy, but God's will for us involves first and foremost that we love and put our undying faith in him, and that we live in the tension of our faith journey together, surmounting our differences with grace and love, the same love and grace God bestows on us. If we cannot extend these to one another, are we really deserving of the grace and love of God?

Confession time for me. I have seen and heard too much in recent years, more so in recent months as I have done some district work, that breaks my heart. I can't imagine how it must break God's heart. There is disunity in churches, districts and the denomination. I know it is not limited to our denomination, it's there in all of them. Some churches have succumbed to the divisive nature of our culture, adopting hard-lined behaviors used in politics and social injustice.

The church, the true body of Christ, is different. We seek to live in the tension of our differences, with love and grace. We have the responsibility to show the world a better way of living together. Maybe not every church is going to be onboard with this way of living, although it is God's way.

I pray every day, that we will live in love and unity, rejecting always human wisdom and embracing the wisdom of God, even if it may require us at any time to live in the tension of our differences. You are a blessed church. I am a blessed to be your pastor; and you are a blessing to each other. Let's together, be a blessing to our community and beyond. It is God's command that we love one another, that we be a team, in essence, and by doing so, those around us will notice, giving us the opportunity to spread God's love. Go team God!! Amen.