

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 One Thing I Ask
Matthew 4:12-23
January 26, 2020

At the Martin Luther King worship service last Sunday, I was listening to a couple of pastors who were talking about the racial divide in the American Church. One of them made use of a quote that I have heard several times before and have myself spoken, that,

“11 AM on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week in America.”

It is attributed to Dr. King himself, and I don't know if it is true or there is some kind of study that proves it, I only know that it sounds like an accurate depiction of things. The question is, can anything be done about it?

The problem is that religion runs deep into the inner lives of those who practice it, and changing old forms and habits is hard. And racial segregation is not the only kind. People also tend to segregate themselves so that they can worship with others like them; the same economic and social status, the same language, the same tastes for music and style of preaching (one of the biggest divides in America is between contemporary and “traditional” models for worship), the same education level, denominational background, and political views. The Church (Big C) is divided.

The idea of an eclectic diverse church, with people from every conceivable background, seems to be an unattainable dream. Even approaching it is a stretch. And perhaps the biggest divide is between those who are, at least, *at church*, and those who are *not*.

1 Corinthians

The Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians addresses many problems that have beset Christian life from the start, with “divisions” in the church at the top of the list. Their divisions had to do with loyalty to various apostolic leaders.

Some saw themselves as a part to the group led by Peter, some Paul, some Apollos, whoever he was. I imagine there was “John” group, though not mentioned here, perhaps not in Corinth. As one might expect, there was even a “Christ” faction, made up undoubtedly of those claiming a superior loyalty to the founder of the faith.

Paul pleaded with them somehow to agree so that there would be no divisions in the church. He wrote that he wanted them to be united perfectly in mind and thought. All this led Paul to make a couple of astonishing statements, that get to the point and force us to reckon with them. He says that Christ did not send him to baptize people, but to preach the gospel;

“not with words of human wisdom, lest the *cross of Christ be emptied of its power*.” And then he says, “for the message of the cross is foolishness to those who

are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Jesus

In the gospel reading for the day, we also find a couple a brief but powerful lines. Two simple stories are related; the first is about how Jesus came preaching the gospel after the baptism and temptation, and the second is Matthew’s version of how Jesus came to call his first disciples. Both stories are accompanied by short but meaningful statements;

“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near,” and, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.”

Any one of those four statements is a sermon unto itself. It is my conviction that in a way they are the same sermon. It is a message about redemption. It is a message about deliverance. It is a message about the general truth that the material world and the things that happen in it are a screen for the deeper spiritual realities that lie behind them, or deep within.

“Human” wisdom is pretty good at describing how the world functions and how to get along in it, improve one’s lot in the short run. But human wisdom very often fails at the level of relationships. The power of the cross *is* that it addresses us *at that level*. And what it tells us to do (live sacrificially) often runs counter to the way the world works on the surface.

The Kingdom, as it is called, is relational, and that is why Jesus tells his would be disciples that they will become “fishers of people” instead of fishers of fish. The Kingdom, the Cross, discipleship all come together, not in the technical processes of the world but wherever human beings meet, and where they meet God.

Church

There are a number of places where human beings meet, and where God is also present. They meet at home and family is one of the great teaching grounds where people learn for better or worse, healthy, or unhealthy, to get along. They also meet at school where they learn about their world, and at work, where they endeavor together to achieve a common goal, to create a good or provide a service that helps the world and for which they can all get paid; and they meet at the Mall and places like it, where they trade for the things they need and want.

All these places where people meet have a primary purpose, a feature that serves as a reason for meeting, and in those contexts, people encounter whoever they find, and such as it is, they have relationships.

I know of only one place where people meet for no other reason *than* to meet, the encounter *is* the purpose, and that is Church, where we do not primarily come together because of what we have in common with others or because of some thing we want or need, but because we have been called to it,

because God has gathered us. That is what *ecclesia* means, the gathering of those who have been called.

There is such great power in this gathering. It stands a chance of bringing everyone together, and that is why it is so troubling that the Church hour is the *most* segregated of the week. We are more likely to encounter our neighbors who are different from us at school or the gym or work or the market, than here at church where God has called us into sacred relationships with one another, under God's grace.

“Let there be no divisions . . .”

Let the Cross, a symbol of sacrifice and love, govern our actions.

Let us turn from the selfish and divided values of the world;
and follow Jesus to where we will find people, with whom we can be Christlike.

I know that this message is *hard*, we often fail at it, it sounds like a downer. If the folks in Corinth couldn't live up to it, then how can we? It is no wonder that we don't.

But hear the words of Paul as words spoken with great love and no judgment from someone who has seen a little more of the light shining in the darkness than most of us have seen; and the words of Jesus too, as tender words of a loving friend inviting us to come and follow, into the amazing world where love and friendship happen, the miracle of souls meeting on common ground.

In the world with all of its divides, it seems like we are surrounded by enemies. I am convinced things are not as they seem, and more of our companions through life are friends than at first we think. Think of church as the place that at its best is a place where we can meet the same people we find in other places and find them friends, instead of enemies, so that our gathering with them becomes the best place of all. It will take repentance and faith as Jesus has spoken, and the power of the cross.

The Psalmist

The psalm for this Sunday is the 27th. The words will serve as a kind of concluding prayer:

One thing I ask from the Lord,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the Lord
and to seek him in his temple.
For in the day of trouble
he will keep me safe in his dwelling;
he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent
and set me high upon a rock.
Then my head will be exalted
above the enemies who surround me;
at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make music to the Lord.

That we may be found surrounded by friends.

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