

Grace Presbyterian Church, Orleans  
“How can we make Christian unity happen?”  
1 Corinthians 1: 10 - 18  
Pastor Jonathan

January 26, 2020  
Epiphany IV

Do you have a favorite leader, or teacher, or politician? Would you mention their name out loud? Or let's take it the other way...do you have a least liked leader, negatively remembered teacher or politician? Don't mention their names out loud.

Leadership is for our protection and growth. It is for our good, or at least was meant for that. We can also experience leadership gone wrong, trust broken, trusted teachers, mentors, superiors at work who hurt us. That doesn't mean that all leadership is bad, but that there are bad leaders. And we know that.

Look at works of literature, TV and cinema. What is the allure of the protagonist, the main character in a book, TV show or movie? Often their leadership skills draw us to them. So how many people like science fiction? Anyone? Sci-fi works on the premise of a team going into space and the protagonist is often a space ship captain. Star Trek certainly did and does a lot with Captain Kirk, played originally by the famous Canadian William Shatner. You and I get to be a part of his team. That's the allure. Fans look to the Captain more than the semi-probable outer space physics and faster than light travel, disruptor or phaser beams, although those are nice. That's why the Star Trek universe has a new program this week around Captain Picard from the Next Generation, which originally aired (not streamed) in the '90s. Even though Picard is now well into his retirement and older years, his stature as a leader in the future draws many into his story. He is someone you want to go on a journey with...that's part of the allure of sci-fi, from my point of view. You can face the antagonists, the bad guys, if Picard is leading the away team or at his chateau in France.

Leaders need prayer, all kinds of leaders...teachers, politicians, pastors...yes, we need prayer. In the end, we are more like each other than unlike each other. We struggle to be faithful to that which we are called. We recognize our limits. I recognize right away that as I am thankful for your having called me recently, I also know I won't be able to please all of you all of the time. I even know that some of you might not like me. But that's a part of having done this for a long time, and also because the Scriptures are

clear. How can we make Christian unity happen? We can't. Or at least I can't make it happen. But let's look at how Paul addressed the issue. We are not the first church denomination to encounter problems that divide us. Division in the church has happened since the beginning. Some even argue that denominations are a manifestation of division. While that is partly true, I prefer to see a denomination as a certain history, which began partly in reaction to some other Christian expression, but also in obedience to Scriptural imperatives. For example, Presbyterians in their government structure tend to be suspicious of individual leaders holding too much power. That's why I can say what I like at the elders' meeting, but in the end I don't have a vote. While I am a key leader here, my power is balanced by that of the elders, and that is good. The congregation's wishes are also balanced by the elders' leadership and the elders' leadership is accountable to the Presbytery which will visit us soon, as is required about every three years. We balance power in this way.

If we go back to Corinth for a few minutes, we see Paul coming up against divisions in the Corinthian Church. And you know that those divisions were based on what...? (*pause*) They were disagreeing, and quarreling based on what they saw as different preaching or teaching emphases from different preachers. Paul is writing to them based on a report from Chloe, a woman who is known to Paul, a new believer whose name means, "the green new growth or shoot of a plant," is unknown to us. She may or may not have been an ally of Paul, but certainly kept him informed. She noted at least four factions, not counting her own, if she had one...

First: Paul, who will be asserting his credentials as an apostle called by Jesus directly (cf. Galatians 1-2), and certainly one of the first evangelists in Corinth who saw people, both Jews and Gentiles choose to follow Jesus, turn away from their sins, and give their lives to the Lord. This doesn't mean they didn't continue to have problems in thoughts, words and deeds. It means he was a key player and leader.

Second was Apollos. We know something about him from Dr. Luke: "Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria (Egypt), came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor, and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John...later the way of God was explained to him more adequately by Priscilla and Aquila." (Acts 18: 24-26) And lest you think he

was only in Ephesus, Dr. Luke adds in Acts 19, verse 1, “While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus.” So Apollos was a good speaker, enthusiastic, and one of the first church leaders.

Third was Cephas. Simon, otherwise known as Peter, was so named when he confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living at Caesarea Philippi, which has those magnificent rock cliffs with altars to many gods. Peter is the Greek version of the name and Cephas is the Aramaic, which means “rock.” Peter was seen as the pre-eminent missionary to the Jews, one of the intimate three disciples of Jesus, later the patriarch of the bishop of Rome.

Fourth was Christ. And we don’t know if this was the kind of person who would say, “I don’t follow anyone but Jesus, so I don’t connect with a church.” There are those today who only find fault with every congregation that claims Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. Of course, it is easy to find fault in the church. The question is whether your real allegiance is to Jesus, the Lord of the Church. And Paul picks up this line of thinking, but puts it in the opposite way.

Is Christ divided? You and I know the answer to this rhetorical question. Yes. Christians are divided. No one could argue differently from the evidence of thousands even millions of human organizations that claim the designation of “church.” Indeed, I found out this week from Richard Long of Love Ottawa that there are 670 Christian congregations in the greater Ottawa area. Yes, 670. And likely that number does not include thirty newer church plants. So the number is 700 or thereabouts. I’m told 102 of them are Roman Catholic parishes, 1/7 of the churches in Ottawa. Is that overall number staggering to you? It should be. So we see many different movements that align themselves with our Lord Jesus Christ.

At the same time as we see all these churches, we know that Christ Himself is not divided. He sees one church, many expressions. He has one body, which Paul will teach on later in 1 Corinthians. Paul says silly things in relationship the question “Is Christ divided?” (v. 13) He asks if Paul was crucified for you? The answer is no. He asks if you were baptized into the name of Paul? The answer is no. And then tells us in no uncertain terms, that he is not an administrator. He did not keep baptismal registries. In fact, he wonders out loud if he baptized anybody, so he might not be accused of

baptizing someone in his own name! Then Paul digresses into saying oh yeah, maybe I did baptize Stephanas, his household (not just him personally, but his family, which may have included children) and Crispus and Gaius, who were likely the first converts in Corinth, in the province of Achaia, which is what Paul says at the end of the letter in chapter 16, verse 15.

Paul's main point is not his record keeping of baptisms, it is the fact that Christ sent him to preach the Good News, that Jesus is for every race and background, everyone who wants to get to know Him. Paul's main ministry is not baptizing, but bringing people to the Cross of Jesus, and the power of Jesus at the Cross, to heal, forgive, restore, bring hope, bring a future, bring new life.

And Paul transitions this little section on divisions in the body of Christ to talk about what holds us together. You know what holds us together here at Grace? It's not me or Donna keeping great records. It's not my wonderful preaching that surpasses everybody else in Orleans. You know that. It's the cross of Jesus.

It's the cross of Jesus that brings us together. We meet at the foot of the cross, where we are broken together by our sins, where we see Jesus' sacrifice for us. There we see Him dying. There we see the two thieves hanging next to Him. And we have a choice. We can follow Jesus and say we do not deserve to be his representatives, because we know our personal sins and rebellion. Or we can mock Him and tell Him what He should be doing in our lives, rather than what He is doing in our lives.

Have you seen the three crosses at the front of the Church and on the church sign? Those three crosses represent: the large one is Jesus' cross. The two smaller ones represent the choice we have everyday to follow Jesus and trust Him, or turn away from Him, mocking or ignoring Him.

***“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”*** Notice the division. The cross does divide us into the perishing and those being saved. Notice that salvation is an ongoing work of God. If we have believed in Jesus as our Master and our God, He has saved us, He is saving us and in the end He will save us. Don't be foolish, but rather listen to God's foolishness, which is the greatest wisdom. Jesus is the way to unity. We cannot see any unity unless we see Him. We cannot find a perfect Church or expression of Christianity,

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but we can trust Him as the Lord of the Church, the Lover of the Church, the Reason for the Church. It is all in Jesus. So while I cannot make us unified. I can point you to the One who can. This year of all years, as the denomination makes difficult decisions, as we make difficult decisions, let us look to Jesus as never before, for the unity and encouragement we need.

Let us pray.