

The Third Sunday of Lent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
March 3, 2024

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

I just heard a joke I want to share with you. A man made his way quickly through the carriages of a train in Ireland, calling out "I need a priest! Is there a Catholic priest on the train?" There was no reply. He then went back through the train, asking, "Is there a rabbi on the train?" Again, there was no reply. He made his way through a third time, crying out "OK, is there an Anglican clergyman on the train?" Still there was no answer. Finally a man in the corner of the carriage timidly raised his hand and said, "I am a Presbyterian minister, if that's of any help". The man took one look at him and said, "That's no good, we're looking for a corkscrew."

The Church at Corinth is a divided church. They are divided about a variety of issues that affect every area of their congregational life. Seven years after Paul and his missionaries founded the church, he received a letter from a prominent family in the assembly, informing him of the serious disunity. Soon after receiving this letter from Chloe, Paul received a delegation from Corinth who wanted his judgment on a variety of issues. Paul takes this time as an opportunity to write this first letter to the whole church at Corinth, a letter that could well have been written to us in the 21st century.

The Church at Corinth, very much like our own community, had been blessed with financial wealth and privilege. Corinth was an important city because it was located in the Isthmus of Corinth in the Achaian Peninsula and it controlled commerce by land and sea trade routes. Additionally, Corinth was the Administrative Center for the District of Achaia. The city was so important that the athletic games of Corinth were second only to the Olympic Games of Athens. They had an outdoor theater that could seat over 20,000 people comfortably. They had a roofed theater that seated over 3,000 people. The temple to the goddess Aphrodite was one of the largest in the entire Greek territory. There were 1,000 sacred prostitutes at the entrance of this temple. And the south side of the marketplace was lined with taverns that had sophisticated underground cisterns for the storage and cooling of drinks (Richards, "Teacher's Commentary", 839). The city was famous for its lax morals, its pagan rituals, and its scandalous lifestyle. It was also known for its love of Greek philosophy and logic, which focused great attention on the attainment of human wisdom and knowledge. So, in many ways Corinth resembles many cities of this great nation of ours.

The first issue that separated the church was the existence of various parties within the church. There were some that considered themselves followers of Paul, followers of Peter, followers of Apollo, and some who claimed a certain degree of moral superiority and called themselves "followers of Christ" or the "Christ party." So, Paul starts his letter by making an appeal to Christian unity. He urges the congregation to resolve their

differences and to restore unity within the church. He asks them, “Is Christ divided?” How can you call yourselves a Christian and be more concerned with the teachings of a particular teacher than with the call to unity and love to which Christ calls all his disciples? The central fact is that in Christ we are one (Richards, Ibid, 842). When you follow human leaders, rather than the Gospel, you fall into human ways of thinking that are very different from God’s way of thinking. As humans we think of wisdom that is based on reason and on logic. We hear an argument and we say, “B follows A, it makes sense, and because it makes sense it must be true.” But the truth is that the Christian message is often at odds with human wisdom. That God would choose to grant us atonement, pardon, righteousness, salvation and sanctification through the great sacrifice of his Son Jesus on the cross, doesn’t make much sense to many.

The cross is foolishness to the Greeks. In their way of thinking, if there is to be an eternal salvation, it could only come through some appeal to man’s capacity to achieve a certain state of moral superiority, a certain degree of intellectual wisdom, or a certain degree of personal righteousness. The idea that God himself would come to earth, become incarnate into human form, and then choose to die for humanity on the cross is foolishness to them. According to Greek philosophy God is immutable and unchangeable. He cannot change form or substance. He cannot be incarnated, be born into human form, and then die on a cross. This is not how God operates. God can never choose to be less than what he is, and becoming human would lessen his substance and would blemish his form. This simply cannot happen!

The message of the cross is also a stumbling block to the Jew. Even though the Jewish mind is willing to acknowledge that a Messiah is to come and that God has the power to intervene directly into human affairs, the Messiah they await is a political liberator, a new Moses, a new King David, a mighty warrior able to restore the fortunes of Israel and willing to punish those who have oppressed God’s people. The idea of a Messiah who is a “suffering servant” is a stumbling block, a reason for doubt, and utter nonsense. Contrary to the Greeks, our Christian’s salvation is not based on the acquisition of wisdom, the advancement of the human spirit, the achievement of some moral higher ground, or even on our personal human achievements. Contrary to the Jews, our Salvation is not dependent on some future political liberation for the nation of Israel. Our salvation is based solely on what Christ has done for us on the cross.

To those who are saved, to us, Christ crucified is the only means by which we avail ourselves of God’s redemptive power. This is what Paul is telling the Corinthians. And I believe the Corinthians problems are our problems too. The Corinthians have fallen into the traps of worshipping the messengers rather than the message. They have drawn lines and circled the wagons around a particular teacher, and have forgotten that the only teacher worthy to be followed is the crucified Messiah. The Corinthians have also drawn battle lines against each other around doctrinal issues, some of great importance and some of little to no importance. They have circled the wagons

around a particular issue, and have forgotten that the only issue worthy of defense is found in the crucified Messiah. They are impressed by human accomplishments, and they have almost forgotten that God chose to use things man despises to secure our salvation. They are impressed by strength, but they have forgotten that God chose to use weakness to secure our salvation. The Corinthian church, very much like our own churches today, have chosen to build little kingdoms around differences.

We too resemble the church at Corinth in this respect. We also have rallied behind individual leaders and their causes and ignore Christ's call to unity. We too have drawn battle lines around single issues and have allowed these issues to divide us into the "us" and the "them" and we ignore Christ's call to unity. We too have divided the body of Christ by not doing enough to encourage reconciliation and peace within our denomination and within the universal Church. Paul today is telling us, "Look at the cross!" The cross is the unifying principle. The Messiah dying on that cross did not die only for those who had the truth on their side, but for all, "that all might come within the reach of his saving embrace". The Messiah dying on the cross did not die only for those who think, worship, baptize, or pray as we do, but for all, "for at the right time, when we were still sinners, Christ died for us". The Messiah dying on the cross did not die for the Episcopalian only, but also for the Anglican from the Global South, the Assemblies of God of South America, the Methodists and Presbyterians around the globe, our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters in Rome, and for Baptists and Non-denominational Christians.

Our Messiah dying on the cross did not die just for those who think as I do around issues of human sexuality, the ministry of women in the church, or even the proper Book of Common Prayer to be used in liturgy. He died for all. The cross belongs to all who are willing to accept it. As we continue to prepare for the passion of Jesus on the cross, let us pray for the unity of the Church. May our Lord allow us a rediscovery of the cross that will propel all Christian denominations to think of each other as brothers and sisters and not as enemies. Amen!