

I Belong to...

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
January 22, 2017
3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

1 Corinthians 1:10-18



Chloe's people have gotten word to Paul, the founder of the church at Corinth, that this little fellowship is in turmoil. No sooner had he left than people began picking teams, so to speak, each one carrying the name of their favorite teacher as a mark of identity. "I belong to Apollos, I belong to Paul, I belong to Cephas..."

It happens.

I heard a comedian tell this story. "Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over."

When I came into this presbytery, at the end of my examination before the Committee on Ministry, one of the members came up to me and asked, "Can I give you some advice?"

"Sure," I replied, always ready for pointers.

“Don’t ever invite a Scotsman to preach for you.”

“Say again?”

“Don’t ever invite someone with a Scottish brogue to be in your pulpit. People around here are crazy for the Scottish accent. They’ll fall in love with him, even if he reads from the phonebook and you may be out of a job.”

I laughed, but my new friend didn’t. And the moment I saw your reaction to the bagpipes in worship the first time, I made a note: “No Scotsmen or women in this pulpit for sure.”

Paul started the church at Corinth, and left it going strong. Somewhere along the line, however, factions had started springing up, and they seemed to all center on personalities. Some of the people really like Apollos. He was known to be a great orator. His words melted like butter on the heart. And he had baptized a few of the members. They went around saying, “I belong to Apollos. I am part of the Apollos denomination.”

Others had gotten wind that at the beginning of things, it was Cephas – otherwise known as Peter – who had been hand-selected by Jesus as the leader of the church. Why should they take on any other name than that of the rock, the leader? “We belong to Peter,” they announced. “The head man.”

Still others were committed to the founder, Paul himself. Those were the glory days of the church, they declared, when Paul was in the pulpit and all was well in the world. You can’t go wrong with Paul. “We belong to Paul.”

Another group cut through the clutter. “We do it the old way,” they said. “We belong to Christ. We do things the way Jesus did.”

I’d like to think we are past that now. But not long ago, I was in a discussion with a colleague and I passed along an author I thought he might like. “What is he?” my colleague responded. After I was silent a minute, he said, “Denomination?”

I responded, “Oh, he’s Methodist.”

He replied, “I try not to read books written by Methodists. They have no theology to speak of. You ever hear that line from ‘A River Runs Through It?’ You know, that a Methodist is just a Baptist who can read.” So I knew what he thought of two large group of Christians.

It happens. While I was in Austin last week, one of my classmates confided in me that he doesn't know what to do with a group in his church. He discovered something about this rather sizable group that set his world on edge.

“What did they do?” I asked.

“Voted for Trump,” he replied. “I had no idea there were Trump people in my church. I'm the pastor of a group of people who think you can be Christian and support Trump. How can that be? Have they not been listening? Do they not read their Bible?”

Which of course made me remember the many people I knew who, after Obama's election in 2008 pronounced their heartache that they were worshipping in pews next to Obama voters. “How can you be a Christian and vote for him?”

It is easy these days to fall into this pattern, setting ourselves up in camps of the like-minded. If anything, Christianity in the United States has made it possible to shop and shop for the neighborhood, the school, the church, where everybody pretty much looks like you, thinks like you, and votes like you. Top it off with a host of media choices that enable people, if they choose, to go through an entire day never hearing an alternative point of view to the one they share.

So, it is easy, then and now, to fall into that age-old game: I belong to Apollos, I belong to Peter, I belong to Trump, I belong to Obama...and on it goes.

It must have been challenging for Paul to pastor the people in Corinth. It was a medium-sized city, shaped and molded by nearby Athens, which in its glory days had a big influence on neighboring cities. Corinth had a relatively educated population, with an openness to new ideas. The people who made up the new church at Corinth would have been influenced by a culture that venerated teachers, and set up competing schools of thought, hashing out philosophy on the streets, ala Socrates.

It is not at all surprising that they end up in this situation. What is surprising for us in our day is the way Paul deals with it. I can tell you how many church consultants would advise us to deal with it today. They would encourage us to get the Apollos people, the Cephas people, and all the other factions into a room and see if we couldn't hash out a win-win outcome, where everybody gets a little of what they want. We would be encouraged to celebrate our diversity and recognize that in order to survive we need to work hard at unity.

All of this is great advice. But notice what Paul does. He confronts them with the truth that Christ is not divided. “Was Trump crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Obama? Is your ultimate trust in the Presbyterian Church (USA)?”

Well, maybe not in exactly those words, but you get the idea.

Our unity cannot be achieved by our own hard work. It can only be discovered as a gift from God in Christ. We are already united. Christ is not divided. It is our own inability to see this unity that keeps us divided in the church along these old and tired lines.

Paul then lifts before them the ultimate sign of our unity – the cross of Jesus Christ. It seems foolishness to most, certain foolishness to a world that is still in thrall of power and status, that still wants to divide us up. It is a sign of God’s self-emptying love, of the lengths God will go to express and enact that love in the world.

A heard of a story of a church in Miami, Florida, that gathered to talk about multicultural diversity in their church. It included Haitians, African Americans, Caucasians, and Latinos. At the meeting, as the conversation went on, Beverly became more and more agitated. Finally, she blurted out, “We are not a social experiment! We are a church. What matters most is we are all God’s children.”

I don’t know about you, but I too have grown weary with the way we talk about identity markers. Race, age, economic circumstances, education, geographical region all play an important part in helping our understanding. But when they become the primary way we identify our tribe, especially in the church, then something important is missing. And when we manage to recognize our unity in spite of these differences, we are not just practicing diversity; we are, as Paul would say, simply being the church.

For Paul, the cross of Jesus Christ “signals the beginning of an age in which all the ways the Corinthians have divided themselves into groups just aren’t any longer interesting, important or defining.”

One of our members told me something a while back that has stuck with me. She said she went into the voting booth on election day, and as she reached into her purse she felt the cross she had received a long time ago when she went off session. She held that cross as she voted to remind herself that even though the vote was extremely important, it was not ultimate, and she would strive to live a cross-shaped life regardless of who won. She were shocked and saddened at the outcome, but grateful for the reminder that even in her sadness, she could choose to live in the shadow of the cross.

We leave here as always, surrounded by the cross. May it be for us much more than a symbol; may it be for us a way of life, a sign of our unity in Christ, our hope for the future. Amen.