

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector**  
**at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**  
**The Third Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**January 22, 2017**

*I Corinthians 1:10-18*

A priest found a serious problem in his new congregation. During the services, about half of the people stood for prayers and about half kneeled. Each of the two sides disagreed with the other. They had the right tradition. Theirs was the best way. Neither side would compromise. Each knew it's what they always should have done.

Being a church, the vestry formed a committee to study the matter while everyone else tried to ignore it. They engaged in dialogue and prayed about it. The priest suggested one week they should all kneel and another week they all stand. That made *everyone* equally unhappy. Nothing anyone said seemed to be of any help. Finally, in desperation, the rector sought out the church's 90 year old founder. She was the only living witness to the original, hence unchangeable, and best tradition. That woman's opinion, her authority, would clear up any disagreement. She knew the *earliest* practice.

The priest pleaded, "Tell me, please, was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during the prayers?" "No, not at all," answered the matriarch. "Well then was it the tradition to kneel for the prayers?" "No, not that either." "Well, what we have now is chaos. Half the people stand and shout and half kneel and scream. Each side claims to be right and neither one will listen to the other." "That's **IT** exactly," exclaimed the matriarch. "**THAT** was the tradition."

In today's epistle we hear that the church had competing allegiances – they were divided. Some things never change. "I belong to Paul or Cephas or Apollos; I belong to Christ. It is not much different today in the Church or in our country. She's liberal – He's conservative; I'm with her... feeling the Bern... trying to make America great again! Half the people stand and shout and half kneel and scream. That's the tradition because our institutions are made up of human beings. Our church meetings, in which the only anxiety is about money, are remarkably pedestrian by ancient standards.

And yet Paul, in the face of that tradition, urges the faithful to break with it. We're called to something more – a deeper way to live. His message almost 2,000 years ago is applicable to our life in church and country today. Just after he offers the expected introductions, which our reading omits, he gets to the point. Let me translate his letter written to friends.

"Dear people of the Church in the city of Corinth. I send greetings to you all. I hear from Chloe's family here that some of you are quarreling. You support this or that leader or group. I'm glad that I only baptized a few of you to lessen the confusion. We don't belong to different groups as followers of Jesus – we *all belong* to God, that's our primary identity! Because we all belong to God, we belong to one another – we need each other. That's the heart of the Gospel.

He writes, "I appeal to you..., by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree... about that at least! Let there be no dissensions among you, but that you are united in the same

mind and purpose.” Paul might be pleased to find how little dissension there is in our church but not in our nation as of late.

Does Paul’s admonition sound strange? When do we follow his advice? At church, in families, in politics? We rarely find we lack dissension. How often do we all share the same purpose unless we are united **against** something or someone – some internal or external threat? Paul reminds us to live together as Christians – for other people. But **how** he calls us to live together is a revelation. He is not advocating a new set of laws but invites us to a life of freedom.

Paul’s appeal is what he calls the “language of the Cross.” Over the years the idea of the cross has been overlaid with meaning. Originally, it was two pieces of wood used a tool of death. It became covered in silver and gold appearing around our necks and on our walls. It is the most common symbol of the Christian faith. When we take off the veneer, what is it? It is an instrument of death before it is a means to resurrection. It means **I** am not the center of the universe, not even my own. It is the symbol of dying every day to self and becoming open to new life. The cross is the ultimate sign of a self – surrendered, offered, given to God and our neighbors. It is a reminder that the center of the world is not me – but God.

Jesus lived this way – he gave himself fully to God and other people. On the Cross, every part of him was emptied. It was not his will he sought to impose but to reveal the complete presence of God on earth as it is in Heaven. It is neither easy nor painless but it is the **only** way that leads to life. That is how the Christian is called to live – for God and other people. The cross is the basis of every human relationship. To live from the Cross is to be emptied, a vessel, a conduit, for love to come through.

What would a life like that look like? If a person lives from the cross, then that person has no self to exalt, no agenda to further, no truth to protect. It is to stand up for or walk alongside our neighbors so they do not walk alone – so they do not march alone, stand alone, or kneel alone. There is freedom and great power in that. It does not mean we will be perfect, but try to live as faithfully as we can. When a group of people lives from the cross they are united in the same mind and purpose with no dissension. Why? It is not mine or yours we seek, but God’s.

Half the people stand and shout and half kneel and scream. Neither side listening – not to each other, not for the voice of God. Jesus knew that the way and the truth of the Cross – begin with a death – but lead to an eternal life. Rather than force us to believe – Jesus emptied himself and invites us to join him in offering ourselves so love might come through.

*Note: Original story from the Rev. John Senette.*