**The Devil Is in the Divisions**

**Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18**

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It finally happened. I was eating supper with some young adults on Friday night and they were having trouble figuring out which way was North, South, East and West. I was mostly teasing when I said, “GPS has just ruined your generation and your sense of direction.” To which one of them responded, “OK, Boomer!”

It was all in good fun, but the arrogance lurking just beneath the surface of that exchange – on both sides – exemplifies the disposition of heart and mind that contributed to the problems at Corinth.

First Christian Church in Corinth was riven by divisions. Those divisions were fueled by pride. And many of the Corinthians suffered from it to one degree or another. As we all do.

To suffer from pride means that I’m somehow better than you are. To suffer from pride means that my group is somehow better than yours. And when you have different groups in a church or a nation that have fallen into pride and are imposing their will on each other, you’ve got divisions, you’ve got factions, and you’ve got trouble.

The devil is in the divisions. Devilish pride can wedge its way into routine cracks, and a good church or a good nation can be rent asunder. That’s what’s going on in the church at Corinth.

Paul, you may remember, is in Ephesus. It’s been about 18 months since he left Corinth. Having established and nurtured the Corinthian church, he turned things over to a pastor named Apollos and set sail across the Aegean so that he could start another church.

That’s when things went south. Paul knows about this because he has informants. Chloe’s people have come to Ephesus and briefed Paul on the deteriorating situation. We don’t really know who Chloe is, but presumably she’s a leader in the Corinthian church – maybe one of the wealthier members of the congregation – and her people are perhaps servants in her household; or members of her faction. And perhaps Sosthenes has briefed Paul as well. Remember Sosthenes? The return address on this Corinthian correspondence indicates that it’s from Paul and Sosthenes.

I don’t have a clue who Sosthenes is. At least I didn’t a week ago. But, at the behest of last week’s worship leader, Marsha Ochs, I did a bit of research. The name appears only twice in the Bible: in 1 Corinthians 1 and Acts 18. The Sosthenes in Acts is the head of the synagogue in Corinth. Paul’s routine when he first arrived in a new city was to preach in the synagogue. Because, you know, if you’re going to preach about Messiah, it’s good to start with folks who are at least expecting one to show-up. So Paul preached in the synagogue in Corinth and he won a few converts and one of them was the leader, Sosthenes. Well, some of the other folks in the synagogue weren’t too happy about that and in Acts 18:16 they beat him up. So Sosthenes and a few other Jewish converts become with Paul the charter members of First Christian Church in Corinth. And around this core they attract some Gentile converts. And therein may lie the start of the first two factions in the congregation: the Jewish-Christians and the Gentile-Christians. Anyway, Sosthenes is not a very popular person in Corinth – his conversion to Christianity being something like a Republican senator voting to convict Mr. Trump – so it’s conceivable that he left town for a while and joined Paul in Ephesus where he helped him with the new church there.

He probably brought some information with him. So it’s not only Chloe’s people but also Sosthenes who may’ve told Paul about the factions and divisions that have done a devil of a job on the church at Corinth.

Let me tell you about factions. They’re bad news in any organization: a church, a nation, a voluntary association, whatever. The Founders of our nation – not just the Founding Fathers but Abigail Adams and the Founding Mothers as well – the Founders were afraid of the spirit of faction and warned of the dangers that it posed. James Madison defined a faction as “a number of citizens, whether a majority or minority, who were united and activated ‘by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.’” That is to say, a faction – whether it’s in a nation or a town or a church – is a self-interested group of folks who are more concerned about the well-being of their group then they are about the common good. They *think* they’re concerned about the common good because they’ve identified their *particular* interests with the needs and desires of the whole community. And the problem, of course, is that you’ve got one faction over here who think they’re doing what’s best for the community and another faction over here who think they’re doing what’s best for the community, and of course the two factions have very different interests and ideas and agendas, and they’re tearing the community apart.

That’s what was happening in Corinth, that’s what’s happened in so many churches over the centuries…and that’s what’s happening in our nation today.

The problem isn’t with self-interested groups per se. You’ll find those in any organization. The problem is when each group thinks that they and they alone know what’s best for the organization as a whole. Which is to say that the problem is when such groups or factions fall into the sin of pride.

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr talks about three kinds of pride: pride of knowledge, pride of virtue, and pride of power. I think there were examples of all three in Corinth.

The fellow who suffers from the pride of knowledge thinks he knows way more than he really does. Now, he may know a great deal. But he’s mistaken his partial and contingent and limited knowledge for total and complete and absolute knowledge. And that’s true whether the guy in question is the philosopher Hegel who thinks that he’s created the final and perfect philosophy of history, or the brainy guy at work who really is the smartest guy in the room but he can never admit that he might occasionally be even a little bit wrong about something.

In Corinth these were the well-read people – probably versed in Greek philosophy – who looked down their noses at the uneducated scum who had somehow found their way into *their* church. In the old Peanuts cartoon strip it’s Lucy shouting, “Those of you who think you know it all are bothering those of us who really do.” *All* of these folks are suffering from the pride of knowledge. They don’t realize – in the words of 1 Corinthians 13 – that their knowledge is only partial and imperfect. The problem isn’t that they know a lot; the problem is that they get all arrogant about what they know and maybe they even form a group of similarly-minded individuals, who provide an echo-chamber that simply amplifies the pride.

Pride of knowledge can rend a community asunder. As can pride of virtue. If pride of knowledge has to do with claiming to be smarter than you really are, pride of virtue has to do with claiming that you’re more righteous then you really are; that you are better and more virtuous than the people and groups around you.

There was a lot of arrogant virtue – a lot of self-righteousness – among the Corinthian Christians. As in the folks who refused to eat meat offered to idols, and lorded it over anyone who did eat such meat.

Now let’s be clear; some very good people – some genuinely virtuous people – suffer from the pride of virtue. In the annals of American history it would be hard to find a person more virtuous than Eleanor Roosevelt. She did a lot of good. And it was in large measure her influence that led her husband to do a lot of good. But there was a paternalistic bent in so much of what she did, and you could sometimes hear in her public comments a certain moral superiority over those whom she helped and those with whom she disagreed. Those who suffer from the sin of pride mistake their finite moral judgments for absolute virtue. And they will not compromise because of course they’re right. To compromise is immoral if you’re convinced that you and your group are more virtuous than anyone else. I mean, if you’re that good, why would you want to lower your standards and meet someone halfway?

Pride of virtue and pride of knowledge can tear a community apart. Especially when they’re combined with the third kind of pride: the pride of power.

That’s when things really get bad, because when those who suffer from pride of knowledge or pride of virtue acquire power, they can force the whole community to go along with their narrow ways of thinking and believing. The Founders were especially afraid of this pride of power. This is why they distributed power across two houses of Congress and three branches of government. I mean, they knew that the formation of self-interested groups would be inevitable, so they distributed power in such a way that each faction would serve as a check on the other; and the only way that government would be able to do anything would be by compromise: where everyone willingly gives up something and we all meet somewhere in the middle because getting something done – that really *does* reflect something of the common good – is more important than being the smartest guy or the most virtuous group in the room. No faction knows as much as it thinks it knows. And no faction is as virtuous as they think they are. And when any faction that has deluded itself into thinking that it *does* have a monopoly on what is true or right gains power, that’s when a church or a nation falls into tyranny.

Which is why we have a degree of separation between church and state in this nation. You don’t want a faction of moralistic true believers of either the right or the left gaining power and imposing their will on others. It happened when moralistic Protestants took control of the Congress 100 years ago and we got Prohibition. It happened when Bible-thumping white supremicists had control of the Congress and African-Americans were systematically denied their civil rights. And it is happening again, where voting rights are being suppressed and districts are being gerrymandered and let’s be clear that over time both parties have been guilty of doing so.

Factions had taken control of various aspects of the life of the Church in Corinth. The pride of knowledge or virtue or power held sway over the congregation’s governance and prayer life and their celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

And factions hold sway over so much of our common life today. Because, of course, we’re all sinners. For a bunch of saints, we sure have messed things up! Because, make no mistake about it, we are all sinners. And in the proud and vain imaginations of our hearts, we Christians, we Hoosiers, we Americans, we human beings have given room for the devil to move in and make a mess of things; in all sorts of places.

Sin is the disease. Pride is the problem. And the cure for pride is grace. Grace is the holy power than can overcome even the most arrogant and ingrained human power. I’m talking about the grace that is revealed most clearly on the Cross. The grace that leads us to surrender *our* knowledge and virtue and power to *God’s* knowledge and virtue and power. That’s what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 1:18. He says that he came to Corinth to proclaim the Gospel, but “not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.”

One who has been challenged and transformed by God’s grace is no longer concerned about wowing people with his or her own knowledge or virtue or power. On the contrary, one who has been transformed by grace is content to live and serve in the ultimate power of the cross of Jesus Christ.

It is at the foot of the Cross that servant leadership is born. It is at the foot of the Cross that grace born of suffering and surrender leads to the kind of wise and virtuous power that overcomes divisions and pursues the common good.

Paul’s gracious words in 1 Corinthians 13 say it all: “our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy – which is to say, our virtue – is imperfect” (1 Cor. 13:9). We all need to remember – with St. Paul – that we know only in part (1 Cor 13:12), and all of the data isn’t in until the Eschaton. Until then – until the end of time – we need to let go of our petty pride and walk together, as a church, as a community, as a nation, in freedom and justice, born of faith, hope and love. Amen.