**Wise Saints, Working Together**

**Text: 1 Corinthians 3:9**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**February 16, 2020**

St. Paul was not the most diplomatic guy. He begins the third chapter of 1 Corinthians by saying, “You’re acting like a bunch of babies!” Did you hear that? Of course, he’s a *bit* more diplomatic than that, but not much! He opens 1 Corinthians 3 this way: I had to speak to you “as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food.” The infantile behavior that has Paul so perturbed is the congregation’s tendency to divide into factions. We flagged this a few weeks ago, but we have to return to it before we leave 1 Corinthians behind because these divisions are a defining factor of the early life of this congregation. “There is jealousy and fighting among you,” Paul says. For..one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos” (1 Corinthians 3:4)

What they should be saying, Paul suggests, is this: “I belong to *God*.” Yes, Paul planted the congregation. Yes, Apollos pastored the flock after Paul was called to plant elsewhere. So one can understand why the church might feel some loyalty to these first leaders. But these men were just human agents of God. They were simply channels for the nourishing waters of God’s grace. “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth,” Paul says (1 Corinthians 1:6). What he means is this: “You owe no loyalty to Apollos or to me or to any other human agent. To God be the loyalty; to God be the glory!”

Divisions within the life of the church, Paul suggests, are an indication that one is living like an ordinary person; that one is failing to live in the power of the Spirit. It is to live, as Paul puts it, “as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ;” as those who are not spiritual (1 Corinthians 3:1). That’s the source of divisions in the church. But *unity* in the life of the church is a sign that one is very much living within the power of the Spirit; it is a sign that one has been *transformed* by the Spirit. That would be the *Holy* Spirit. That would be the One made known especially in the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul is addressing the good folks of First Christian Church in Corinth, of course; but when he speaks of divisions and factions, he could be addressing the good folks of almost every congregation that I’ve served. I think of the divisions between Jamaicans and Filipinos and Anglos in my first church; although I’m still thankful that at least they were all in the same building! One thinks of the divisions between charter members and new members in many congregations; or the divisions between the old guard and the new guard in a congregation that is experiencing renewal, yet struggling with letting go of the past. I could tell you some stories about congregations filled with saints; yet prone to division.

But, of course, it’s not just the church that is prone to division. It’s human nature to divide into factions. “I’m a conservative; I’m a progressive.” “I’m a Republican; I’m a Democrat.” “I belong to Trump; I belong to Bernie” or Pete, or Amy, or Elizabeth, or whoever is in the headlines this week.

To divide into factions is to behave like mere humans. To come together around a common cause is to behave like saints. That could well be a summary of this entire first letter to the Corinthians. “You are saints,” Paul says to First Christian Church-Corinth. “You are saints,” Paul says to First Christian Church-Bedford. “Let’s act like it. Let’s trust the power of the Spirit to help us act like it. There’s work to be done. Let’s roll-up our sleeves and do it together.”

I’d like to call your attention again to a portion 1 Corinthians 3:8-9. Paul writes, “The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose…For we are God’s servants, working together…”

1 Corinthians 3 points forward to Paul’s concept of community. And we know this concept, because we find it in the more familiar chapters of 1 Corinthians 12 and 13. His concept of community is this: love binds all the saints together in the body of Christ. There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And in the power of the Spirit, all those gifts work together for the common good (see 1 Corinthians 12:7). There are varieties of gifts, but the greatest gift of all is love (1 Corinthians 13:13). It is the love of the Spirit that binds the saints into community; a community born of wisdom and cooperation.

At least, that’s what happens when pride is laid to rest at the foot of the Cross. Let me say it again: that saintly community of wisdom and cooperation emerges when pride is laid at the foot of the Cross. It is pride that divides the body of Christ into factions; the pride of knowledge or virtue or power that we talked about several weeks ago. It’s the pride that says, “I’m smarter than you are;” or “I’ve got a better moral compass than you do;” or “I’ve got the power, so I’m going to do what I darn well please, and I don’t really care what you think.”

“This is baby talk,” Paul says. These are signs of spiritual immaturity.

But all of that changes when one experiences the power of the Cross. All of that changes when one sets aside power over another and chooses instead to suffer with one another. When we suffer with one another, and we look for common ground upon which we can work with one another, the tarnished image of God within each of us begins to shine, and we begin to recognize the image of God in each other.

What does this mean in practical terms?

It means, first of all, that all of us are fit for service in God’s Kingdom. We are all fit for service because we are all made in the image of God. We are all fit for service because we are all *gifted* by God. We are *differently* gifted, but we’re all gifted. That’s the whole point of 1 Corinthians 12. Sometimes folks are tempted to divide churches or other voluntary associations into those who are fit for service and those who aren’t; that’s one of the easiest ways for pride to give birth to factions. But we’re all fit for service, because we’re all gifted. Different gifts, but the same Spirit. Some are leaders and some are helpers. Some teach and some discern. Some preach and some manage. Some are prayer warriors in the quiet of their homes; some are boots on the ground in the community. But all the gifts are equally important. And all come from the Holy Spirit. And all who are gifted are called to work together for the common good.

You’ll recall Paul’s famous image in chapter 12 of the different parts of the body working together: hands and feet and eyes and ears and the whole bit. The hands need the eyes; the feet need the ears. Each part of the body needs all of the other parts. So it is with the body of Christ. So it is with the church: many gifts, one Spirit; one ministry. That’s 1 Corinthians 12 in a nutshell, and that’s what Paul is pointing toward here in 1 Corinthians 3: you all need each other. *We* all need each other.

All of us are fit for service in God’s Kingdom. We suffer together, and we work together, for the common good. Therein lies wisdom.

All of us are gifted for service in God’s Kingdom. And wise leadership makes good use of everyone’s gifts. The best example that I know of this is the way in which President Lincoln put together his cabinet and, in the process, saved the nation. While this is an example from government, it’s a great model for leadership in the church or any organization. President Lincoln, whose birthday we marked last Wednesday, put together what historian Doris Kearns Goodwin calls a *Team of Rivals*. Lincoln, of course, ran for President in 1860. If you think the nation is a mess now, consider what it was like then. Not only was it badly divided into factions, but they were about to form great armies and kill each other.

Lincoln competed in an impressive field of candidates for the 1860 Republican nomination. That race was almost as crowded as this year’s race for the Democratic nomination. Each candidate thought that he alone was uniquely qualified to be President. And each of Lincoln’s distinguish rivals certainly thought that he was more qualified that the less well known lawyer from Illinois. But it was that prairie lawyer who got the nomination.

Once he was elected, Lincoln did an extraordinary thing: he placed each of his rivals in his cabinet. He didn’t seek to punish his rivals. He didn’t seek revenge against them. He didn’t waste his energy insulting them. And he certainly didn’t surround himself with a bunch of “yes men.” Lincoln knew that in order to face the fiery trial that lay ahead, the nation would need the considerable gifts of the entire field of candidates. He was humble enough to admit that he lacked many of those gifts himself. He was mature enough to surround himself with such talent without feeling threatened. Now he made it clear that ultimately *he* was in charge of the Executive branch of the federal government. But at the same time, he had the best Secretary of State, and the best Secretary of War, and the best Secretary of the Treasury, and the best Attorney General that he could find. And he pulled them together as a team. That’s strong leadership. That’s making good use of complimentary gifts. That’s forging a team that is devoted to a common cause. They suffered together, and they worked together, for the common good. Therein lies wisdom.

 All of us are fit for service in God’s Kingdom. And good leadership makes use of everyone’s gifts. Good leadership – Kingdom leadership – celebrates diversity as a gift from God and seeks to get diverse factions moving in the same general direction. Good leadership – Kingdom leadership – suffers with those who suffer and rejoices with those who rejoice (see Romans 12:5). Good leadership – Kingdom leadership – seeks not to bully its way forward, but rather encourages team work and seeks to build consensus. Good leadership – Kingdom leadership – honors the community, honors the nation, honors the body of Christ, and honors the varieties of gifts and groups within the community and the nation and the body of Christ. Good leadership – Kingdom leadership – recognizes and honors the image of God within the self and all others. Acting as God’s image bearer, and treating others as God’s image bearer, is a sign of spiritual maturity. From such maturity flow compromise, cooperation and community.

That’s where Paul is seeking to lead the First Christian Church of Corinth: toward compromise, cooperation and community. A church that lives in accordance with such principles serves as a model for all other communities and organizations and nations.

That’s what we’re called to be, saints. We are the body of Christ. We are the saints who gather for worship and service at the corner of 15th and K in Bedford, IN. We live and serve in the power of the Holy Spirit. And we can serve as a model for others.

So, as Paul says at the end of his letter to the Corinthians, “Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love…The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you” (1 Corinthians 16:13-14, 23). Amen.