

“Crossing the Aisle” GPPC 1-26-20
Isaiah 9:1-4, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

If you read through Paul’s letters in the New Testament sometime, and look at the churches the letters are written to, they have a few things in common. For one thing, they are all churches that are dear to Paul, even if he is sometimes mad at them.

For example, Paul’s letter to the Galatian church is one of his angrier letters. Some scholars even say it’s his angriest letter, but that’s debatable, because some of his other letters are pretty grumpy too.

Notice how he starts his letter to the Galatian church. “Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the members of God’s family who are with me, To the churches of Galatia.”

Nice. This has all the charm of a court summons, or an eviction notice. When it comes to the Galatian church, Paul does not spend any ink on initial pleasantries. He gets right to his credentials—not sent by human commission or human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and

Jeff Paschal

God the Father, who raised him from the dead. Oh, and by the way, and all the members of God's family who are with me. How do you like them apples?

But then in the very next sentence Paul reverts, at least for a moment, to his usual grateful self. He says, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen."

And this is one of Paul's angrier letters, if not the angriest. When he writes to the Philippians, he starts out with thanksgiving for them that goes on about half a page. At some point with the Philippians you want to say to Paul, "Enough already." Paul loves all the churches he writes to, even if he's upset with them.

Another common characteristic of the churches Paul writes to is that they are all communities of faith founded on trust in God through Jesus Christ. These churches are not businesses. They are not self-help groups. They are not gathered around some vague principles of "being nice" or doing "whatever makes me feel comfortable." No they are

Jeff Paschal

communities of faith centered on God's revelation and call in Jesus Christ with all of the specificities, challenges, and joys that entails.

And that leads to a third characteristic of all the churches Paul writes to. They are all having some sort of conflict or even multiple conflicts.

The Galatians are having conflict over law and grace.

For the Philippians the challenges are pettiness, an absence of unity, a lack of humility, and a disagreement between two leaders, Euodia and Syntyche. This has degenerated into a conflict of opposing camps in the church.

Meanwhile, among other things, the Roman church struggles with the relationship between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians.

All of the churches Paul writes to are dealing with conflict. Every. Single. One.

So we look at the Corinthian church this morning. Some of you students of the Bible remember the Corinthians are infamous for their pride and conflict over various spiritual gifts, and their misguided belief that the *unusual* gift of speaking in tongues somehow makes them

Jeff Paschal

superior to garden variety Christians. Paul answers this misconception with his masterpiece about love in the 13th chapter of the letter. “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels but do not have love...” If you have time, reread chapter 13 this week.

But the Corinthian church’s conflicts are multi-faceted. This morning’s reading shows us they also are struggling with disagreement and division. As Paul says, “Now I *implore* you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”

Now is Paul suggesting that every Christian in that church agree about every issue? No. This is a church, not a totalitarian regime. Instead, he is encouraging unity of mind and purpose, basically diversity of thought within the unity of a common faith and a common purpose. Members of the church don’t have to agree on everything, but they need to have the same sense of purpose—to be disciples of Christ.

But what’s happening is that members of the church have begun quarreling. One scholar says, “The word used here (*eris*) suggests

Jeff Paschal

attitudinal divisions and interpersonal bickering rather than doctrinal or ideological schisms. It is often closely associated with jealousy and petty strife.” (Carl R. Holladay in *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year A, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany*, 133.) The quarrelers have divided themselves into warring camps based on allegiance to leaders in the faith community. “I belong to Paul.” “I belong to Apollos.” “I belong to Cephas.” Some even say, “I belong to Christ,” which seems right, but scholars think this is probably being used in a contemptuous way. “I belong to Christ...and you don’t.” In each of these cases notice the language. “I belong to...” This is a huge problem, because as Christians who do the Corinthians truly belong to? Christ.

Paul keeps pressing the issue with a series of questions. He thinks of the church here not merely as a community of faith, and not just as a family of faith, but as the Body of Christ. And with that understanding in mind, he asks questions with obvious answers, “Has Christ been divided?” Has Christ been chopped into pieces and distributed as a product? Certainly not. And was Paul crucified for you? Of course not. Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? Don’t be silly.

Jeff Paschal

As one professor puts it, "...No merely human preacher can ever be the basis for the church's faith and unity...The church is saved and sustained only in the name of Jesus. When this truth is kept clearly in focus, petty rivalries and preferences for different preachers are seen in their true light: They are simply ridiculous." (Richard B. Hays, *1 Corinthians*, Interpretation, 23.)

So in verses 17 and 18, Paul brings his argument to its conclusion. He says he's been called to preach the good news, and the good news is God's love we know in the cross of Christ. We are a "being saved" people by the cross, the power of God.

So how are we a "being saved" people by the cross? Because the cross sets the terms for who we are and who we belong to.

Without the cross, we might imagine that the church is a place primarily for us to feel good, instead of the Body of Christ serving God in the world.

Without the cross, we might think there is no cost for being a disciple of Christ, instead of knowing that following Christ will demand that we stand up and speak out for what is right.

Jeff Paschal

Without the cross, we might be deceived into believing the church is a just social club divided by little clichés and where back-biting is okay, instead of remembering it is the Body of Christ where the truth is spoken in love and patience and forgiveness are practiced again and again.

You see, the cross crosses any partisan aisle and its awesome shadow falls upon us all. The cross puts our pettiness and divisiveness in perspective. And it calls us to speak and act differently than the culture around us.

Back in 1992, lay leaders and clergy of our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), were meeting in Wichita, Kansas for our national General Assembly in which major decisions for our church are made. One of the controversial topics back then were LGBTQ rights. And there was a tendency for people who disagreed to become nasty with each other. So the assembly came up with a document they used and has been used in Presbyterian congregations ever since. It's called "Guidelines for Presbyterians during Times of Disagreement." I'll read part of it to you—10 guidelines. "In a spirit of trust and love, we

Jeff Paschal

promise we will... 1. Treat each other respectfully so as to build trust, believing that we all desire to be faithful to Jesus the Christ; _ we will keep our conversations and communications open for candid and forthright exchange, _ we will not ask questions or make statements in a way which will intimidate or judge others. 2. Learn about various positions on the topic of disagreement. 3. State what we think we heard and ask for clarification before responding, in an effort to be sure we understand each other. Speak the truth in love Ephesians 4:15 4. Share our concerns directly with individuals or groups with whom we have disagreements in a spirit of love and respect in keeping with Jesus' teachings. 5. Focus on ideas and suggestions instead of questioning people's motives, intelligence or integrity; _ we will not engage in name-calling or labelling of others prior to, during, or following the discussion. 6. Share our personal experiences about the subject of disagreement so that others may more fully understand our concerns. Maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace Ephesians 4:3 7. Indicate where we agree with those of other viewpoints as well as where we disagree. 8. Seek to stay in community with each other though the

Jeff Paschal

discussion may be vigorous and full of tension; _ we will be ready to forgive and be forgiven. 9. Follow these additional guidelines when we meet in decision-making bodies: _ urge persons of various points of view to speak and promise to listen to these positions seriously; _ seek conclusions informed by our points of agreement; _ be sensitive to the feelings and concerns of those who do not agree with the majority and respect their rights of conscience; _ abide by the decision of the majority, and if we disagree with it and wish to change it, work for that change in ways which are consistent with these Guidelines. 10. Include our disagreement in our prayers, not praying for the triumph of our viewpoints, but seeking God's grace to listen attentively, to speak clearly, and to remain open to the vision God holds for us all."

Being in community, especially these days, is hard. The only thing harder is *not* being in community. In our disagreements let us set an example so the world will know we are Christians by our love. Amen.

©Jeff Paschal