

“Supremacy, Repent”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany – 26 & 27 January 2019  
I Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

The first Christians in Corinth argued a lot, and who could blame them? Here they lived, a very small group in the midst of a very big city full of pagans. Based on what we know from scripture, Paul had come to share the story of Jesus with them several years before they got his first letter. That’s really not a lot of time to digest what Paul had told them. We might think otherwise, but I’ve studied Paul’s letters my entire adult life, and there’s a lot there that puzzles me. I’ve had my current cell phone for several years, and hardly know how to use it. As a young community, it had to be hard for the Corinthians to stay unified in the process of figuring out how to best practice the faith.

Remember they didn’t have the whole New Testament, as we do. Most of us were raised Christian. Our ancestors in Corinth grew up either Jewish or pagan. And the Corinthians didn’t have the legacy we do of nearly 2,000 years of experience in resolving theological and ethical conflicts.

With that in mind, let’s try to resist the temptation to judge them or feel smug, because a lot of what they fought about seems petty or silly, which is probably what our descendants in the faith will be tempted to think about us in a few generations. Think back to the 60’s and 70’s, when The Episcopal Church was arguing fiercely over ordaining women. Why that was ever a problem mystifies my teenage children. Lord only knows what *their* grandchildren will think of *us* and our arguments, and we need to stay mindful of that, before we presume to judge the Corinthians.

Yet even with grace and mercy and and humility foremost in our minds, we cannot deny that the Church in Corinth was as Stephanie likes to say “a white hot mess,” tortured about the best way to be faithful together. For instance, there was what I like to call “the vegetarian faction” that rejected eating meat, not because they cared about animal cruelty or heart disease, but because they worried that meat bought in the market might have been sacrificed to a pagan god. There was no way to know, and if it had been sacrificed to a false idol, then eating the meat would contaminate the soul of the person who ate it. The meat eaters in the congregation countered that the pagan gods weren’t real. Since the animal had been sacrificed to literally nothing, the meat was safe.

In his letter, Paul sided with both. “You’re right,” he wrote, “the meat’s OK,” but abstain from it anyway. This isn’t a matter of fundamental justice, but of preference. It’s best to not let this tempest in a teapot trouble those who want lamb and beef off the menu, because Jesus is coming soon, like don’t-buy-a-calendar-for-next-year soon, so there’s no time for distraction. Focus instead on your mission, on spreading the Gospel. [I Corinthians 8]

There were so many more things they fought over, like whether married couples should have sex or whether single people could get married, and that’s just the tip of the iceberg, but underneath it all lay the nasty attitude, “I’m better than you,” based on who baptized them. “Well, I was baptized by Paul.” “That’s nothing. I was baptized by Cephas, aka Peter.” “Apollos baptized me, and since nobody’s better than him, I’m better than all of you.” No wonder Paul started his letter, the very first chapter, on this issue. [I Corinthians 1:10-17] It was the fulcrum. Get these people to see that in the eyes of God all of them are equal, and the rest can be handled fairly easily, but as we know only too well, getting people to see that in the eyes of God all are equal is not easy at all.

Racism, misogyny, religious bigotry – all based on a sense of superiority – these evils have blighted human history up to the present day, and if we don't work hard, they may last until the end of time, or even make a comeback and thrust us back into the Dark Ages. And we cannot deny the role the Church has played, and sometimes still plays, in dehumanizing and demonizing those who are different or deemed threatening.

Well after the Civil War ended most churches in the South relied on the Bible to justify their view of black people as a subhuman species, and today many white supremacists and neo-Nazis and the sulking silent racist who dislikes and distrusts people of a different hue often base their beliefs on their reading of scripture.

From the very start, the Church has silenced the voices of women. They were the ones who took the risk and stood by Jesus as he died on the cross. Women found the empty tomb on the third day. You might think they'd have something to say, but if they did, it was suppressed efficiently and excluded from the New Testament. Male supremacy still thrives in many churches.

To us and to our ancestors in Corinth, Paul reveals that the Church is the Body of Christ, each of us individually members of it, all of us equal, no matter our background or current status or what distinguishes us outwardly from others. Each member is dependent upon all the rest. Each member is indispensable to all of the rest. As Paul wrote, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable."

At his home synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus chose from Isaiah a prophecy that emphasizes good news to the poor, that proclaims release of the captive, recovery of sight for the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. He purposely picked a passage that identified his mission with those

regarded as weak, with the marginalized in society, with those deemed inferior. And when Jesus told the crowd that his presence among them fulfilled the prophecy, he identified not only his mission but himself as one of them, as one of the outcast and rejected and derided.

Back then, if you were poor, people thought it a sign that you were out of favor with God, or just plain lazy. So many still believe that today, despite the evidence that the global economy is rigged, a deeply flawed system.

They thought captives deserved their plight, no matter how harsh, because they were irredeemably wicked. The United States has the highest per capita incarceration rate in the world. We beat Russia and China and North Korea and Iran, not exactly the gold medal you want to win, but plenty of people are proud of it. Is our populace simply more criminal than that of every other nation? Do we just have better law enforcement? Or is something wrong with the system, like mandatory minimums that lead to long sentences for relatively minor crimes? I don't know the answer, but we need to think about it harder and talk about it more.

The blind were blind because either they, or perhaps their parents if a person was born blind, had committed a grievous and unforgiveable sin. Some Christians still say that disease, like cancer, is God's Will, caused by our sin. Blaming and shaming like that are the favorite pastimes of those who think they are superior.

To regard oneself as intrinsically superior, because of birth or wealth or ethnicity or party affiliation or denominational choice; to regard oneself as intrinsically superior is to judge others as inferior, a most dangerous sin, easy to commit, corrosive to the soul, and totally opposed to love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Yet how, we might ask, can someone criticize and call people to repentance over this without themselves assuming superiority? It takes a love that resists hate and leaves judgement

in the hands of God alone. There's a big difference between criticism and judgment. Criticism is aimed at a behavior. Judgment is about a person's identity. It takes humility born from reliance on God's grace, a humility that accepts accountability to other members of the Body of Christ. It takes the wisdom to tell the difference between "I am better than you," and "We are equal, but I can see some ways that we can both be better, for we all share some measure of responsibility for what's wrong."

Finally, it takes vigilance to exercise the spiritual gift of prophecy, because anyone given that gift stands in a perilous place, very close to the edge. But if you sense that gift and refuse to receive and exercise it, if you choose to do nothing for fear of reprisal or being mistaken, that's complacency born of fear, not faith, and that sin is just as bad as using the gift and getting it wrong from time to time. To name the demons of racism and sexism and religious bigotry unleashes the power to cast them out. To stay silent concedes the field to evil by default. Evil loves it when we shut up, especially when the prophets among us remain silent.

We are the Body of Christ, each individual members of it, each with particular gifts for the common good; all called to a common purpose – the advancement of the Kingdom of God on Earth. Sometimes, we'll argue about what that looks like and how it gets done, just like the Corinthians and almost every other Church that ever was, and that's healthy. A wholly like-minded congregation lacks the necessary imagination for ministry and is also horribly boring. Yet we need to keep in mind that how we disagree says more about who we are than the substance of what we disagree upon.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that we're a white hot mess. Far from it, I'm grateful to be here and hope you feel the same, but the Body needs a seasonal flu shot. This is what I call an "immunization" sermon, because the virus of hate is always looking for a way

in. The more we grow in faith and unity, the more the forces of evil will try to pick up apart. The more mature we grow in faith and unity, the greater the challenges God will give us. But when we stay mindful of whom we are as the Body of Christ, each person a welcome member, whether eye or hand or foot, the peace we enjoy will endure, a peace God calls us to share with a world that desperately needs it. Amen.