

“Division and Wisdom”

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01/10/2021

Opening Prayer

Good morning Beloved, I hope and pray that today finds you and yours doing well. Last Sunday we talked about New Year’s resolutions, in particular we related them to our faith. I hope and pray that we would all take significant steps this year in our walk with the Lord, that we would be strengthened in our resolve to serve well the One who made us. It is along this line of thinking, that we are to strengthen our faith, that our next sermon series is dedicated. We are going to be going through the book of 1st Corinthians over the next several weeks, perhaps longer. We have taken journeys together through a bunch of books in the Bible at this point. We have spent significant time over the last few years in Ezekiel, Job, Jonah, Colossians, 1st-3rd John, James, Revelation, Philemon, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1st-2nd Thessalonians, 1st-2nd Timothy, the Gospels, and more. One book of the Bible that we have taken bits and pieces from, but have not studied much, is 1st Corinthians. This book, like all of them of course, is important for us as Christians and holds a lot of merit for us in strengthening our faith and firming up our steps as Christians. The focus for us today, beyond just being introduced to this book, is on two of Paul’s main teachings throughout the entire New Testament... division and wisdom. As always though, it is important for us to get the background on this book before we delve into it to far.

1st Corinthians is a letter written to a divided church shortly after the time of Christ by the Apostle Paul. Unlike some of the other letters that we have studied, the book of 1st Corinthians is written by Paul to a church that he was intimately familiar with. He knew the leaders, he had helped organize and start the church, he had spend a significant amount of time in the city on one of his first missionary journeys. Yet, despite the fact that the church had a good base and had been given good leadership, there were serious struggles within this congregation. There were divisions based upon who’s leadership to follow, divisions based upon Jewish and Gentile food law/customs, divisions based upon sexual liberties and taboo practices, amongst others. These divisions make sense, as the majority of folks in this church were younger Christians who came from a Gentile (meaning non-Jew) background. It also makes sense that these divisions (and subsequent lack of wisdom) with the circumstances surrounding the city.

The city of Corinth was a renowned trading destination, as it was located on a narrow isthmus between two points on the Mediterranean. Sailors, traders, armies, and travelers would go through Corinth to avoid a dangerous or long journey. In and around the cities were several temples to various gods and goddesses. The most influential one no doubt was the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. The temple reputedly employed hundreds or potentially thousands of female and male prostitutes. This, connected with the already loose lifestyles of Greek and Roman fame, made Corinth a haven for illicit behavior. The Christians who Paul was speaking to came out of this kind of lifestyle, and they lived around it daily. It is very similar to

Christians who live and work around modern day Corinthian cities like Amsterdam, Las Vegas, or Bangkok. With this in mind it makes sense that there would be a lack of unity and wisdom in this city amongst these church members.

Paul begins his letter in an interesting way, shining some light into who we are as well as who they were. Verse two read “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours.” Paul calls these people, whom are going to be recipients of a harsh scolding over the next sixteen chapters, “saints.” It belies that he is not writing them simply to diminish them or to put them down, but to remind them of their calling out of love. Much like a good parent scolding a child for bad behavior, he wants only what is best for the church. He confirms this further by saying in verse four “I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus.” He is thankful for these people within this church. It should again be noted that he loved them, that he had a big hand in growing the church, that he had spent a long time with these folks in working for the Lord. He wanted to keep them together, to fight against the false logic they were using, the useless knowledge that was dividing them and allowing sin and devastation to creep in. As always, as it is with any book in scripture, the purpose is to help folks hold fast and stay close to the Lord.

Verse ten reads “Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgement.” A theme in this book is Paul’s calling for the people of God to walk in unity. There are many reasons why unity may be lacking in a church, we see many of them today right? It could be due to a scandal, to gossip, to differences in theology, to preferences on how to do things. Basically all of these were present in the church of Corinth, but the first one that Paul addresses is this disfunction that comes from various teachers. “For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe’s people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each of you is saying, ‘I am of Paul,’ and ‘I of Apollos,’ and ‘I of Cephas,’ and ‘I of Christ.’” The concern here, the first thing that Paul mentions that is destroying this church, is that the people who were of different theologies were spending their church time tearing each other down instead of worrying about Christ’s commands. This disfunction was not actually the fault of Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas by the way. Paul’s teaching were legit, and they spoke very heavily to Gentiles (non-Jews) who were searching for the Lord. Apollos was one of Paul’s close workers, and he had overseen much of the church of Corinth’s growth... but he was away at this point working in another city. Cephas is another name for the disciple Peter, and his teachings too were legit, although Peter most closely associated with Jewish men and women. A correlation for us today would be a church divided over the minister or over high level volunteers who are each seeking to serve the Lord well, but may be doing it slightly differently.

I loathe the thought that we would have disunity like this in our midst. The most wonderful thing about a church is not your pastor. The thing that brings life to a congregation is not whether or not you agree with your leader on everything, or if it is always a joy to listen to a

sermon, or anything like that. Of course who your pastor is matters and who the leadership team is matters and what those folks do matters. But the key reason for unity and relationships within the church cannot be built upon your minister or church leadership alone. That breeds division in a place that is supposed to be founded on all of us living and working and serving the Lord together. The number one reason I have heard from most of you that you first attended your churches here (if you were not raised here) and stayed? It was that someone you knew invited you, and that the church family itself was super inviting and has loved on you and your kids and your friends. The key to building a sustainable church that lasts and grows and most importantly does the Lord's will is not to just find the right preacher. It isn't to just have the best programs in place. The most important sustainer of a church is to build a culture where Christ is honored, where others are honored, where love and truth abound and God's people are united together under His banner. Even the Apostle Paul states this, that unity is not found in following him, but in following Christ together. The truth is that there are going to be tough things that happen in a church family. Someone will do something dumb, there will be a sermon that you don't like, there will be some kind of drama that pops up. It is inevitable in our own families right? We should expect no less in our church family. With that being said, the reason a family can overcome drama and the reason people work through it is because it is their family. Your family is your family, whether by blood or marriage or adoption, it is your family. We have to look at our churches in a similar fashion, that this is my church and I want to make it work with my fellow Christians. Sometimes we do have to walk away for whatever reason from a dysfunctional church sure, but the vast majority of the time the right response to difficulty in church is the same as what it would be in your family. This one is mine, I am going to stick with it and make it right because this is where I belong. That is Paul's message to the Corinthians in chapter one, to remind them that they are in this life together. This is the wise way of looking at it.

The second point of emphasis in 1st Corinthians one is on that wise way of looking at the world. If you prefer it is having God's view rather than man's of what is going on. Verses 18-21 reads "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside.' Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe." To the world we as Christians look foolish. Believing that an almighty being exists who doesn't ever fully show Himself? Believing that we nice people are actually so evil that we need His help, His death in a horrific way, to be saved? Believing that an omnipotent God would love us and take notice of us? It sounds ridiculous on its face, doesn't it? Yet in our hearts we know it is true. Anything extraordinary can be explained away as being a farce. Just look at how people react if you do something great in your own life that is out of the ordinary. You got an A on a test you studied hard for? Someone will argue the test was easier than it should have been. You get promoted at work? Someone will argue that it is just because the boss liked you that you got the position. You cleaned your life up from some kind of addiction or bad history? Someone will say you just

are hiding it now. In Jesus's case people (as Paul mentions!) are always looking for signs and for special knowledge to prove that He actually lived and died and rose again, that He was actually the Messiah. Beloved, just because the world thinks something is extraordinary does not mean it is not true. Paul's last few words in the first chapter of Corinthians shows just this, and it ties together his point about unity and wisdom.

“But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, ‘Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.’” He is speaking directly to the messed up, disloyal, sinful church folks in the church of Corinth. He is also speaking to you and me Beloved.

This is where the rubber meets the road for us. The Lord chose those people in Corinth, who struggled so mightily with divisions and sins and problem of all kinds to proclaim His gospel. To the world, it is foolish to expect that the Lord would love, use, or even want to interact with imperfect churches. However, in a move that proves His love and grace and plans, the Lord does just that, both with the Corinthians and also with us. Beloved members and friends of KUMC and PCUMC, you have been chosen to live in wisdom and unity, to serve the Lord regardless of what the world thinks and the struggles you encounter. You are chosen, a royal priesthood, saints, according to His grace and mercy. Let us live like it, being the church in a churchless world, being Christ's workers in a Christless world, being what He has called us together to be. Let us pray.

Closing Prayer