

Church Leadership: A Word of Warning - A Word of Hope

I Corinthians 1:10-17, 3:1-11

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Today we hit the ground running looking at our sermon series on “receiving the Spirit ~ embracing our gifts.” This isn’t going to be a sprint ~ rather a marathon with the “baton of blessing” being passed to us from those who began the run in the first century on that first day of Pentecost, and it will continue beyond the time that the youngest of us in this room completes their race and rests from their labors.

The basis of our series is Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth. This letter we have as “first Corinthians” is actually a second letter (I Corinthians 5:9) Paul who founded the church in Corinth in the mid-first century continued to support them when he was away with letters. This second letter that we know as I Corinthians was written about half-way through that decade. This letter is primarily known for its discussion on gifts, which will spend a lot of time on later this summer but today we are going to begin with the fundamental theme of this letter which is verse ten of chapter one. “Now I appeal to 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.” Everything that follows in the letter must be understood in context of this appeal.

Some people think it would have been easier to be a Christian in the early church, but our lessons today shows us that whether a church is five years old or fifty five years old, there are things in common to be learned and yes, re-learned. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth because some people, specifically Chloe’s people, had been complaining to him about serious problems in the young church. These complaints focused on the factions that were forming. In his letter, Paul addresses the local problem in ways that have universal lessons.

Before we look at the details of those lessons, let me share with you their relevancy in a modern context. I have spent the last three decades studying these universal lessons. Twenty-nine years ago this last spring, as a twenty year old, I learned in a dramatic, and even traumatic way, about the dangers of factions in church leadership. It started innocently enough; I was a college advisor on a junior high retreat and was asked to check the bus. As I stepped onto the bus, I discovered one of the youth pastors and another youth advisor both who were married to other people in a “romantic encounter” one might say a “compromised situation.” I was shocked and embarrassed. It took me nearly a week to get up the courage to tell the senior pastor. When I did, his response was, “who are you to question the actions of a pastor?” Stunned, I left his office, deflated and confused. It took me nearly another week to finally tell the other youth pastor [it was a large church, several thousand people, we had two youth pastors]. Then, the snowball effect came into play. Tensions were high. People gathered around one youth pastor or the other. Within months, two hundred people had left the church to start another one. I was so uncomfortable I didn’t even want to go to either church. In fact, I was so uncomfortable; I left the state, and transferred to Whitworth College in Spokane, WA. There I spent a year, every week reading this letter of Paul’s to the church at Corinth, and then on Sundays visiting churches that I looked up in the yellow pages, started at the A’s with American Baptist. I kept all my experiences in a journal so

that I could compare one week, then one month, to the next. And I used Paul's letter, I Corinthians, as a "ruler" to measure the life of each church, regarding gifts, observation of the Sacraments, and yes, leadership.

The leadership problem reported to Paul was this: the church was dividing their loyalties along leader lines. Remember the church in Corinth wasn't a building but rather a community of believers that met in house churches. Architectural remains tell us that about 30 people, maybe up to 50 in some of the wealthy homes could gather although most of the members of the Corinthian church community were probably of modest means. So we can infer that the community of probably 150-maybe 200 people met in smaller groups in different houses. You can see how divisions could easily be formed. Verses 1:12-13 tell us that the divisions went along these lines. Some were for Apollos. Some for Peter. Some for Paul. And some for Christ.

Apollos was an educated Jew from Alexandria who preached about Jesus with refined rhetoric and eloquence. Peter was, of course, the disciple who had walked with Jesus. There is some question whether Peter actually preached in Corinth but Peter's followers kept loyal to him. Then there was Paul; the missionary who founded the young church but by all accounts was not a terrific preacher. And then there were some who were saying they "belong to Christ." Which is absurd that Christ would become just "another leader" among the many...no human leader can ever be the basis of our faith. Paul points out this absurdity by saying; "was I, Paul, crucified for you? Do you baptize in the name of Paul?" Of course not, Christ is the foundation of our faith.

Paul picks up the discussion on how divisions over leadership are detrimental to the church in an even more direct way in chapter three, by saying that in essence it's time for them to spiritually "grow up!" If they continue to adhere to their own leader, Apollos, Peter or Paul, are they not merely seeing things from a "human perspective" forgetting that God, through the Spirit promised by Christ, brought the church into being. And all leaders only do what they do as instruments of God. Paul reminds them that each leader serves God's purpose using himself as an example, saying, that he, Paul, was the one God used to plant their church, and then, Apollos was used by God to water it, but only God, only God, gives the growth! Choosing sides, aligning with a leader, is dangerous and destructive to the community God is calling into being ~ a community of believers called to be an alternative society ~ a society that lives in love to honor God and serve others.

That's the past, what about the present context. It would be easy to keep things at an arm's length by lamenting what is and isn't done in and through the divisions in the church universal; beginning with the church in Corinth, going through the East/West split, Catholic/protestant split, the many denominations, etc. and while we can apply what we learn to those situations let's look at our own context in this time of transition in leadership at Covenant.

Like Paul's letter to the Corinthians began with naming the challenge of leadership, our sermon series on "receiving the Spirit and embracing our gifts" has to begin with that same challenge. We have to name it, so that together we could look at it. We have to face it so we can move beyond it. We have to heed the warning so that we can hear the hope! In our "consumer society" it is tempting to "shop" for a certain kind of pastor, some may want an eloquent speaker, others, a disciple who's been there, still others a founding pastor with passion, and the warning is, not to

put so much emphasis on the messenger that we lose the message. The message of hope is that only God gives the growth. When a pastor leaves, it's normal to grieve but some may be tempted to not move forward because "no one will be like the one who left." And that's true!; no one will be like the one who left, because we all have unique gifts that God uses for the growth of the church, and God is growing the church! We may not know how ~ we may not see it yet...but we do know that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for." [Hebrews 11:1]

This summer, we are going to explore and I pray experience renewed life, deeper connections with God and others, peace and unity, greater energy and effectiveness for ministry and mission. My friends, the race is on, but remember it's a marathon...it may include some sprinting, but mostly a marathon, as you, the Session, the Presbytery, and I run with perseverance and prayer; for the purpose of building up of the church and for service of others, because we here at Covenant have what Paul proclaimed to the Corinthian community was fundamental to the life of any church, that being, Christ, and Christ is our foundation! Amen!!

Prayer:

O Christ, thank you for being our foundation, the living core of our life. Help us to turn to you again. Fill us anew with your Holy Spirit, that we may grow as you intend, becoming more and more the community you are calling us to be. Thank you for your Spirit that strengthens us and fills us with gifts that we may build up the church and serve the world in your name. Through your guidance and grace, let us with actions, words and song, sing a new church here at Covenant into being. Amen.