

Epiphany 3 Year A  
I Cor 1:10-18  
January 27, 2008  
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Because I used John's passage on the call of Andrew last week to speak about discipleship, I thought that I would turn from our Gospel lesson for today - Matthew's version of that same call - and instead concentrate our reading from First Corinthians. Though I do think a careful comparison of the Matthew and John, particularly noting how different they are, will repay your effort, this isn't a bible study, it is a sermon, and I have nothing more to say just now about discipleship than I said last week. In any case, our passage from Paul is very instructive for our time, but it is also subject to the sort of misunderstanding that could create the impression that there is something wrong, even unchristian about disagreements within the household of faith. That isn't what the apostle is saying at all, and a careful look at this text as well as a reference to the whole rest of his life proves it. But because we do have within the larger church these days the sorts of disagreements that are leading people to accuse each other of being unchristian, I thought that today I would take advantage of this opportunity to address the issue of genuine disagreements within the church.

Paul begins by appealing to his fellow Christians "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."

That sounds clear enough; no arguing. But when we look at the context in which he makes this statement, and the rest of his career, we see that he is in fact prohibiting only one arena of disagreement, and leaving the rest open. He goes on to say that there are “quarrels” among the members of the church. “What I mean” he states, “is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’” What Paul is here declaring is his concern that many Christians are identifying their teachers, their mentors as their primary source of devotion within the household of faith. That, he says, is wrong. “Was Paul crucified for you?” he asks, completely rhetorically. “Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” Of course not, and this is the point. Paul is declaring quite simply, but very forcefully, that our primary devotion must never be to any particular teacher or any particular teaching as the means by which we attain salvation, for we do not attain salvation by following a particular teacher. We attain salvation through what God did in Christ, and therefore our primary, our only devotion as a matter of fact, must be to God and what God did in Jesus Christ through his death and resurrection. Just a moment later in this same letter he will declare “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to us the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Shortly after that he tells his audience that he “did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

Look at what is going on here, for it is important. From Paul's perspective the issue is not, and cannot be, which teacher is right or which set of teachings will lead us into earthly righteousness and eventually our heavenly reward. The issue, the only issue, is the work of God in Christ, who died and was raised. You can fight about other things, but never fight about this. The foundation of our faith, that "rock" to invoke a biblical metaphor Jesus is said to have used, is the death and resurrection of Jesus, and that is where we place our faith, and that is where we stake our claim. Not in what we know, not in what teacher we follow, not in what powers we have, but only in God, and in what God did in Jesus Christ. That was the sense in which Paul appealed to the people to be in agreement. Do not form parties around which teacher is the "right" one or which teaching will get you to heaven. Do not do that. Be united in your common devotion to Christ, and to what God did in Christ. The rest is fair game.

Paul demonstrated that this was his perspective throughout his career as he quite famously got involved in a heated controversy with Peter about the question of the inclusion of gentiles within Christianity. "When Cephas came to Antioch," he told the Galatians, "I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned." Elsewhere in the same letter we see him in an equally serious fight with the so-called "super-apostles" who claimed that they had special knowledge and understanding on the basis of their abilities to do remarkable things. He was a passionate advocate for the inclusion of Gentiles, and an equally passionate advocate against giving special privilege to any class of

Christians, no matter how spectacular the things they could do. So fight, fight about whatever it is that is important right here and now, but make sure that your fights are carried out in the context of a common devotion to God, and a common faith in Christ Jesus crucified and raised. Unless we are willing to say that Paul was just totally inconsistent literally from one paragraph to another in his letters this can be the only meaning of his words to us today; he simply could not have intended them to be understood in any other way.

That is what makes them so important for us right now at this epoch in the life of the church. We are faced with a number of controversies not just within the church but throughout the Anglican Communion, the largest and evidently most significant of which is whether or not the church ought to be allowing the blessing of same sex unions or the consecration of gay bishops. These are important questions, and both sides are populated by people of deep faith in Christ.

What concerns me is not that these issues are before us; in other forms they are before our society, our whole world, so of course if we are to be relevant at all to the social and spiritual concerns of the world right now they must be before us. What concerns me is what concerned Paul, that there is a tendency to take a view of these issues, a particular teaching about them, and decide that it is the litmus test of whether or not people are faithful and true Christians. We are in danger as a whole church of reaching the point where people are lining up not around our common faith in what God has done in Christ Jesus, but around a

particular teacher and a particular teaching. To suggest that John David Schofield, the Bishop of San Joaquin, who is even now attempting to lead his whole diocese out of the Episcopal Church over this issue, has the only true Christian perspective on this issue, or that John Spong has the only true Christian perspective or that our presiding bishop, Katharine Jefferts-Schori for that matter, has the only true Christian perspective is as much as to say "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos." It is to decide that a particular teacher or a particular teaching is the way to God. Paul warned us against that idea nearly two thousand years ago, and his warning is still valid, still worth heeding.

For if our deepest allegiance is to our opinions about the church, or to specific teachers whose opinions we consider true, then it seems to me that we have slipped into either a form of Gnosticism, the belief that we must know certain things that not everyone knows, in order to find God, or, worse I think, a kind of idolatry which ends up worshipping the beliefs and doctrines we can understand and not the one God who is beyond all beliefs and who "passes understanding." Certainly those of us who care about these issues, and I am among them, will find ourselves agreeing with one teacher and one interpretation over another, and so we will disagree among ourselves. Where such disagreements occur within the common faith we share, within the one proclamation of "Christ and him crucified" we have nothing to fear. Only when we decide that there is something more important to us than our common faith in God and in what God has done in Jesus Christ, only then do we run the risk

Paul addressed in today's passage, which is the risk of disintegrating into sectarian confusion and strife.

Whether in the home or in civic life or in the church people fight with one another because what we are doing is important. In fact, it is fair to say that fighting will cease within the church only when the church becomes so totally irrelevant that no one cares any longer. Paul understood this better than most, and as a result he fought harder than most, and prevailed more often than most. His appeal is crucial today. Be unified in our faith in God and what God has done in Jesus. Let there be no disagreement about our common proclamation of that. Then fight about the other stuff, not in order to see if you can hang together, but because we are fully and completely committed to each other within the bounds of that common faith. If we can do that, and here I mean not just we in this cathedral, or even we in the Anglican Communion, but we as the whole of Christianity, then we have nothing to worry about, for we will be able to weather any storm that strikes. But if we can't do that, if we devolve into parties that belong, metaphorically, to Paul or Apollos or Cephas, then in the end it won't matter at all, because sooner or later there will be no issues left to argue about, and no one left to do the arguing.