

Has Christ Been Divided?  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
January 23, 2010  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:

What if peanut butter never met jelly?

What if biscuits never met gravy?

What if Trade never met Tryon?

Those profound, probing questions framed a recent community meeting of people interested in inter-racial dialogue in Charlotte. They were posed by the organizers of the Community Building Initiative, which exists, in its own words, to “intensify the commitment and increase the capacity of individuals and organizations to build a more racially and ethnically inclusive and equitable community” here in Charlotte.

The Community Building Initiative, or CBI, which happens to be chaired by Caldwell member Deb Hannah, is one of several local organizations that host serious, sustained conversations about race and community. Others of this church community are involved in similar ongoing organized dialogues.

The Rev. Claude Alexander, the outgoing chair of the Community Building Initiative, spoke at its annual breakfast. You may have seen his comments published a few weeks ago in the Observer. He recognized the innate comfort we have here in the South with living separate but apart. But, he went on to say, “different together is better,” and he is right.

It’s fun to ask “what if?” questions such as, “What if peanut butter and jelly had never met?” Each of us might ask similar questions: What if our parents had never met? What if you’d never met your spouse or committed partner or that one loyal friend?

More to the point, what if two people or groups with great differences never met? Years into the relationships we now share here at Caldwell, we might consider how our lives would be different without some of the bonds that have been created here, bonds that now bridge race and class and sexual orientation. What if?

What if we had not had the chance to experience a worship gathering like the one we were given last Sunday? What if, indeed.

In the days since last Sunday, however, we've been reminded that travelling the road of diversity and equity is just as often a rocky and bumpy ride. If you've followed the local news, you're aware of how one minority organization has, very intentionally it seems, thrown gas on the fire of our local racial dialogue, calling Charlotte a "bastion of racism" and suggesting that organizations outside the city boycott Charlotte as a location for their events. Since that comment was made, others have publicly opposed that view, including our mayor, a representative in Congress and other African-American religious and political leaders.

None of these voices has claimed the work of racial reconciliation is anywhere near finished. For now, maybe that is the best we can say of all of this.

It's ironic, isn't it? Even as we paused last weekend to remind ourselves of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream, we, as a community at least, were engaged in yet another brouhaha that shows we have yet to achieve that dream.

One of the most prominent aspects of the broken human condition is our seemingly never-ending desire to divide and separate ourselves. Jesus told his apostles, "The poor will always be with you." It seems we can say the same about disagreement and division among peoples.

Friends, I didn't plan this week to write another sermon about how our faith informs our interracial and multi-cultural journey. We have plenty of opportunities to give that serious subject proper consideration. So think of today's sermon as one that transcends something as deeply ingrained and formative as our individual ethnic and racial origins and identities. For those who would call themselves Christians, there is truly a higher part of identity.

We may be tired of all of this bickering and arguing. We may be weary of encountering the real injustice and inequity that we see in the world. But, as people of faith, we do not have the option of asking for a hall pass. We can't sit out this part of the Christian life. No, when it comes to advancing healing and reconciliation, we have no choice. We must be involved. That is what the gospel requires.

But the way we must be involved is equally specific. As people who claim Christ, we must rise above the divisive labels and judgment-laden generalizations that come easy to some. We must not point the finger first, nor should we point the finger at the one

who points first. Our call is to point in only one direction - to Christ, who above all, taught love.

That is what Martin Luther King would want us to remember about him, more than anything else, that while he stood for justice he understood that the root of true justice, lasting justice, is love. When other agendas creep in and dilute the Christian's agenda, then an individual, a group, an organization or a society is inevitably aiming for something less.

That, brothers and sisters, is exactly what the apostle Paul means when he asked, "Has Christ been divided?"

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When Paul helped start the new Christian community in the city of Corinth, he knew that he was attempting something that few, if any, in his day had ever tried. The norm then, as it is today, was for people to worship, live, work and socialize only with similar people, rich with rich and poor with poor, Greeks with Greeks and Jews with Jews and so on.

Some of you may remember when a visiting pastor prayed here, thanking God for the "weird, wild mix" of people that make up Caldwell. But by Paul's own description, the church at Corinth was its own "weird, wild" mix -- rich and poor, Jew and Greek, slave and free. While such a mix might have been untenable in other cities if the day, it was right for Corinth, a commercial and religious hub influenced by the coming and going of artisans and sailors.

Archeologists have found evidence of temples for worshipping Greek gods, Egyptian gods and the Roman emperor, of course, along with Jewish temples and later, Christian houses of worship. There was even a "temple for all the gods,"<sup>1</sup> according to one historian of the time. Call it political correctness or an early stab at interfaith dialogue, this only reminds us that differences among religions and peoples have always been with us.

As was his custom, Paul helped the Christian community in Corinth get organized, named leaders to take it forward and moved on to do the same in another community, as this thing called Christianity was just getting started. Not very long afterward, human nature crept in and soon the Corinthian Christians showed cracks that turned

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<sup>1</sup> New Interpreter's Bible, Volume X, quoting Pausanias, 2.6-3.1

into deep divisions. The wealthy asserted themselves over the poor and some individuals claimed privilege over others. Factions organized behind different leaders and theological opinions.

All in all, people did then what people do now. Things got to that point that we have all seen or experienced at one time or another. Attention turned away from the promise of common ground and focused only on difference and division. If a gap could be established that separated one group from the 'grievously wrong' ways of the other, then so be it. It was, often as not, petty jealousy at work, perhaps even insecurity, but its power to divide was as potent as any other.

This was the situation when Paul wrote a series of letters that have been combined into the books we know as 1 and 2 Corinthians. They provide lectionary passages for weeks to come and, no doubt, we will hear and consider some of those passages. Today's focus is on Paul's opening lines, his first pen strokes expressing what must have seemed like folly to those who saw how bad things were among the Christian Corinthians.

"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 ...."

Paul's message must have sounded woefully naive to some. Still, he persisted:

"Be united in the same mind and the same purpose."

But Paul was not as naïve as those lines may sound at first. He was a master of translating the good news of the gospel across different cultures, classes and places. He knew that some diversity of perspectives and experiences would inevitably be a part of the Christian communities he helped organize.

So, his message in today's text – the overview of the entire letter - is deceptively simple: If you call yourselves Christians, then act like Christ. Nothing more. Nothing less.

When Paul asks, "Has Christ been divided?" he is simply saying that there is no place for parsing and dividing the essence of who Christ was and what Christ did. No, Paul says, the message of Christ then – and now – remains whole, unassailable by even the most sharp- or silver-tongued self-appointed interpreter, including Paul himself:

“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.” (1:17)

In other words, Paul says, the message of Christ needs no dressing up, no fancy wrapping or well-crafted, focus-group-tested sound bites. The message of Christ has a power all its own, a power that cannot be commandeered for the wrong purposes or agendas. What is that message, you may ask: It was the hope spoken by the prophet Isaiah and echoed in the gospel of Matthew once the messiah Christ Jesus had come:

“The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light ....

You (God) have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy ....

For the yoke of their burden and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.”

Of all of this, Paul has these words to say, which close our passage from today:

“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (1:18)

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Friends, we will hardly be one hour back into the reality of the world beyond our doors before we are reminded of all that would divide us as a city. Even our best efforts to build fair and affordable housing in diverse neighborhoods bring cries of “Not in my back yard.” Our public schools are re-segregating. Our media bring us stories of accusation and cross-accusation.

Within the church, we know too well all the topics we love to argue. Indeed, our own denomination is just beginning a national vote issues that will stir another round of divisive dialogue – issues such as how we govern ourselves, where power in the church comes to rest, how we express our faith, and what limits we would put on God’s choosing of who is called to be ordained.

It can be bewildering. But Paul gives us a simple and clear message, one that Dr. King and others repeated just when we needed to hear it most. Christ has not been divided. Christ cannot be divided. God’s love in Christ – and what Christ ultimately showed us about God’s full nature and will for the world – cannot be sliced and diced to suit what is comfortable or convenient or self-serving.

The “message of the cross,” as Paul described it, is one of love, humble, self-giving love. When everything else clouds our understanding – humanity’s penchant for acrimony and accusations, its love of differences and division, its copouts of judgments and generalizations -- when all of that saps our strength, let us remember that, as people of faith, our striving is to be, more than any other aspect of our identity, people of God in Christ. And, even our smallest children understand that God in Christ is one thing, which is love.

Let me close on that note with the words of the great preacher William Sloane Coffin of the Riverside Church in New York. He wrote this:

“God is love,” as scripture says, and that means the revelation is in the relationship.

“God is love” means God is known devotionally, not dogmatically.

“God is love” is not a truth we can master; it is only one to which we can surrender.

“God is love” does not clear up old mysteries; it discloses new mystery.

Faith is being grasped by the power of love.

In the name of the one who loves us still, our creator, redeemer and sustainer, Amen

