

Epiphany 3 January 22, 2017 St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Franklin, TN 1 Cor. 1:10-18; Matt. 4:12-23 Katherine Museus

I'm going to cut right to the point, to the topic I assume is at least near the top of everybody's minds this weekend: Donald Trump's inauguration as 45th President of the United States of America.

Words spinning through the media include: conflict, polarized, worry, divided.

Our congregation reflects that national reality, if not on the surface of our interactions here at church, then at least in the viewpoints we carry in to worship with us. Within our membership directory are some who supported Trump for President since the days of the campaign, because they thought he could bring the right changes to our nation, and there are some who took to the streets this weekend to lift up their rights and those of others which they believe will be ignored by the new administration. And of course there are some here who turned off the TV and said, "I don't want to hear any more about all of this."

All of that floated to the top of my mind this week as I read Paul's words to the early church in Corinth: "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."

Apparently the Corinthian church was divided over a whole lot of things. Paul spent all of 1 Corinthians — one of the longest letters in the New Testament — trying to settle dispute after dispute and to remind the Corinthians of the importance of their unity in Christ.

In the section we read together this morning, Paul addressed one of the ways the Corinthian church had divided itself: by who baptized them or by whose Christian teachings they followed. Paul wrote that he'd heard rumors that the Corinthians were saying things like "I belong to Paul" or "I belong to Peter"...

...which definitely feels like what's happening in the U.S. right now. Doesn't it seem like a lot of people are dividing the conversation in terms like, "I belong to Trump!" or "I belong to Clinton!?" Or "I belong to the Democrats!" / "I belong to the Republicans!?" Even if it's not said so explicitly, those allegiances seem to underlie the way we talk to one another and the way we post on Facebook and the news sources we read and the way we understand what's going on.

So maybe this is a particularly good time for Christians in the U.S. to reflect on Paul's response to a similar situation from long, long ago: "Has Christ been divided? Was Paul [or Clinton or the GOP] crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul [or of left-wing or right-wing politics]?" ... "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. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." From thousands of years ago Paul calls us to focus on our unity in Christ and the message of the gospel.

This is the point where it's tempting to go with an easy interpretation of what Paul said there. Something like, "What really matters is that we're all Christians and we need to get along, so let's only talk about churchy things in church and sing kumbaya a lot."

But that's not exactly what Paul was encouraging, nor is it what we see that Paul himself did. (And it's definitely not what Jesus did – that's why he got in so much trouble.) Yes, Paul exhorted the Corinthians to remember that they were one in Christ; yes, Paul wrote those beautiful words: "Love is patient, love is kind..." (1 Cor. 13:4). Paul encouraged compromise and setting aside our pride and all that good stuff. But Paul also set boundaries on what Christians could compromise, boundaries on what we could be patient about, boundaries where love had to "get tough" and stand its ground. And those boundaries were the truths and the demands of the gospel.

For example: later in 1 Corinthians Paul gets tough about how the Corinthians are celebrating the Lord's Supper. Back in that time the Lord's Supper was still more like a meal than the simple ritual we have today. And Paul said, look you're eating this meal and calling it the Lord's Supper. But "when you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk" (1 Cor. 11:20-21). In other words, some Christians — probably the wealthier members of the community — had more time to sit at the table and more food to eat and more wine to drink. They would already be full and drunk by the time poorer members of the community arrived.

That's not what the Lord's Supper is about. The Lord's Supper is a sign of God's love for the whole world: rich and poor equally. The Lord's Supper is like a foretaste of God's Great Banquet, where each and every person will have enough to eat. Paul held the Corinthian Christians accountable to the gospel in how they celebrated the Lord's Supper; the way they gathered to eat and drink in Jesus's name needed to show who Jesus was and the message Jesus brought: that God desires to "fill the hungry with good things" (Luke 1:53).

Paul's instructions to the Corinthians on how to celebrate the Lord's Supper are a small example of the truth he communicated throughout 1 Corinthians: we need to be united in Christ, and our unity needs to proclaim the message of the gospel — in the way we live right now. It's not just about getting along; it's about holding one another accountable to the gospel. It's about continuing the work of Christ in our time and place.

And the problem, of course, is that the gospel is not only about what we might call "churchy things." There's a pretty strong pattern in history of diluting the gospel to "the good news about how to get into heaven." But when we read scripture and study the life of Christ and the community of early Christians, it's like being hit over the head with the fact that the gospel is about what's going on here and now, too. The gospel — God's good news to us — doesn't just kick in after we die. The gospel is also about now: about spirits and bodies and neighborhoods and nations right here and right now.

The gospel is about loving God and our neighbors (Matt. 22:36-40).

The gospel is about bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, giving healing to those who need it, and setting the oppressed free (Luke 4:18-19) — here and now.

The gospel is about caring for the foreigners and refugees in our midst (Lev. 19:33-34, 24:22; Mark 7:24-30).

The gospel is about showing through what we do and say that “God so loved the world that he sent his only son...” (John 3:16).

The gospel is about mercy within justice, hope and faith in times of fear, forgiveness in times of wrongdoing, love in times of hatred.

These are the boundaries at which we must take our stand. And together, Christians help one another figure out what these things mean for our day to day lives: how we speak, how we act, what we care about.

As Christians united in Christ here at St. Andrew, we must help one another and our community as a whole to proclaim the gospel in word and in deed. And the political diversity of our congregation, which can seem like something that threatens to divide us, can be a great help to us in this. We come with our differing understandings and differing viewpoints, and we gather together around what we share: a deep need for the love of God and deep commitment to the gospel of Christ. With our differences, we can help open one another's eyes to better ways to live out the gospel, to opportunities to do Christ's work: to spread the message of God's love, to serve others, to humble the proud and lift up the lowly.

Let us join together as disciples called by Jesus, united in Christ's love and bound to the gospel. Amen.