

Today I am beginning a series of sermons on 1st and 2nd Corinthians that will take us through the next two months. The texts that I have chosen correspond with the Uniform Lesson Series. The Uniform Lesson Series are the Scriptures which are found in the Present Word curriculum which is used in the Bigger Room Sunday School class which I am now teaching. So in other words, you will have an opportunity over the next two months to read the Scriptures in worship, hear me preach from these Scriptures, then gather with me and others to reflect on the sermon and on the Scriptures.

This format is going to hold my feet to the fire. If I say something which you think is off target then you have an immediate opportunity to challenge me. If I say something which has caused you to look at an issue in a new way then you will have an opportunity to reflect on your own questions.

I like the format of being able to immediately reflect on a sermon with the presenter of the sermon because I think that this is a model of the way that church worship in the future needs to be. Folks in my generation and older folks than me are used to trusting authority. The model for church has been to hire a professionally trained pastor and trust him or her to present information in a sermon which a passive hearer soaks up.

Folks in my generation and older sit in the pews, soak up that pastor's interpretation, and then we go on our way and eat our lunch. We say we either like the sermon or we don't like the sermon. This model has been used for a long time and it is all that many of us know.

I am here to say though that this model of church is not going to be viable with the next generation. Adults younger than me do not give pastors like me the benefit of the doubt. They want to engage with the person and younger adults believe that truth is found in a common conversation rather than in a lecture.

Sermons as we have known them are becoming less and less effective. Dialogue to discover truth together is becoming more expected. Dialogue over lecture is preferred. And sermons, as we have traditionally done them, have been about lecture.

I share all of that to say that I welcome you to come into the Bigger Room after the Fellowship time and engage with me and others around the Scriptures presented in worship. You are invited to be more than passive listener. I hope that we have so many people that we need to move into the fellowship hall.

If being in that kind of setting intimidates you then engage with me after worship sometime via email, twitter, or that old timey thing called a phone. Although I guess cell phones are not old timey. You can also come and talk to me in person or meet me for breakfast or lunch somewhere. I think the conversation is vital in helping worship to become more effective and alive.

Today is a great day to begin this type of format because I am going to use my sermon today to reflect on the most recent actions of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA, our denomination. Woo-hoo!! Our denomination is set up like this. Our local church here is part of a group of churches in this corner of South Carolina. Our presbytery is Providence Presbytery and it consists of all of the Presbyterian Churches in our denomination within 5 counties.

Our presbytery gathers about 3-4 times a year and it is made up of elders from each church and pastors in the presbytery. Every two years our presbytery, along with the other 170 presbyteries, elects elders from local churches and pastors to attend the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA. Our presbytery elects two elders and two pastors to attend. We also send a youth advisory delegate who can speak at GA but not vote.

At this biannual assembly, the General Assembly, or GA, gathers to worship, hear speakers, and vote on matters before the whole church. There are lots of issues that are discussed but only two of them made the national news this year. One issue was the votes taken on same gender marriage and the other was divestment from 3 companies that work in Israel.

By a vote of 51% to 49%, the GA voted to remove stock that it owns in Hewlett-Packard, Caterpillar, and Motorola. The PCUSA representatives sought to meet with representatives from these three companies about practices which the PCUSA deemed to not be peaceful but these three companies could not come to a compromise with the denomination.

After several hours of discussion, it was decided by the very close vote to no longer own stock in these companies. The GA also affirmed the right to Israel to exist and affirmed its support of a two state solution for the Israel/Palestine conflict. I am not really going to say any more about this but feel free to ask me more about this later if you have questions or comments.

I now turn to actions concerning same gender relationships. The General Assembly passed an interpretation of our church constitution which allows pastors to perform same gender marriages and for congregations to allow church property to be used for same gender wedding ceremonies in states where it is legal. This action is immediate.

But the General Assembly also made it very clear in their ruling that no pastor is obligated to perform a same gender wedding and no church is obligated to allow their space to be used for a same gender wedding. The decision to perform a ceremony and/ or allow a ceremony to be performed is up to the pastor and Session. No pastor or congregation is forced to do anything which goes against their conscious.

The second action related to marriage by the GA was in sending an amendment to the presbyteries for a change in the constitution related to the definition of marriage. The proposed amendment reads that marriage is between two people, traditionally a man and woman.

This amendment will now be voted on within the next year by all of the 171 presbyteries and a majority of the presbyteries must vote in favor for it to be added to the constitution. Our presbytery, again made up of elders from each congregation and pastors, will vote sometime in the spring.

When I sent out the email about these actions to the congregation, I immediately received 3 responses. One response was from someone who was greatly concerned by these actions, one email was from someone who celebrated these actions, and one email from someone who was confused and had lots of questions.

I share that because I believe these three emails reflect where we are as a congregation. We have people in our congregation who are wondering now if they can continue to be a part of the Presbyterian Church USA and predict that this will mean the death of the denomination - hence my sermon title, we have people who are very proud of this action by the PCUSA, and we have people who are not sure what they think about this subject and want to study it more.

That is where I think Paul's letter to the Corinthians has something to say to us. Paul is writing to a congregation that is divided. Paul, who organized this church and then left, has gotten a letter that the people in the church are not getting along. They are dividing themselves up into groups and they are naming themselves by the leaders that they say that they follow.

Read I Corinthians 1:10-17

Some are saying that they belong to Paul. Some are saying that they belong to Apollos, an established leader in town. Some are saying that they belong to Cephas which is the Aramaic translation of Simon Peter. And some are saying that they belong to Christ.

Now we may think that this last group is the faithful group. But we know how that goes. We have heard people say that you need to listen to them because they know what Jesus really wants. You need to follow them if you want to follow Jesus. They say that if you oppose them then you oppose Jesus.

But Paul says to all of these groups, “stop it.” Stop dividing yourselves up into subgroups. Do not allow your differences to tear you apart. Because what happens when groups in the church start to subgroup into like minded groups? What happens is the church starts to turn inward. And why do we turn inward and form these groups? We turn inward because we do not trust God.

We turn inward and form these cliques of like minded people because we do not trust God. We do not trust God to be in control and we think that we have to therefore be in control. And so we look to gather up people who will give us more power to wield on others. We begin to think that the church is ours rather than believe that Jesus Christ is the head of the church.

The young woman who was excommunicated from the Mormon Church by a panel of men because she campaigned for ordination of women is a sign of this attempt to exert power and control over others by groups in the church.

So we break up into these subgroups and we try to see which group is going to win out. Sometimes these groups can form over the most stupid of things. The red carpet in the sanctuary group verses the blue carpet in the sanctuary group. But then we get into the marriage equality group over here verses the traditional biblical marriage group over here.

We have the group over here that loves the pastor verses the group over here that thinks the pastor needs to go. We have the group over here that thinks worship should have more traditional music verses the group over here that thinks that worship should be more spontaneous.

But Paul has some very harsh words to say to us in the church when we break apart into groups like this. He simply says to stop it. Claiming your subgroup is not faithful. Trusting in God is faithful. Affirming Christ as head of the church is faithful.

So how do we respond to the most recent actions of the GA? We pray together and alone, we study the Scriptures together and alone, we worship together and alone, and we engage in dialogue with fellow Christians especially with ones who we totally disagree with over this issue and any issue.

In other words, we don't try to influence others through power, control, manipulation, or threats. Instead we submit ourselves to God's will and we begin to trust in God. We do not have to have the answers. Instead we are invited to journey with God as our companion and allow God to lead us where God wants us to go. And that journey may not provide you the clear cut answer you think that you need to the issues before us.

Ultimately it means submitting ourselves to God. Submission to God does not mean finding like minded people to affirm what you already think and to give you some sense of greater power. Instead, submission to God comes about through prayer, study of the Scriptures, worship, and community with fellow Christians.

If we submit to God's will and not our own, I believe that we will see that our true strength lies in our common faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and our Savior.

AMEN.

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-Text: I Corinthians 1

-Given: June 29, 2014 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION:

Holy Trinity, Three in One, we come to you and confess that we do not celebrate our unity in you but instead our differences from one another. We confront issues in our society and in our church and we choose up sides. But through your servant Paul and others you teach us to look to you as the unity that brings us all together. Help us to place our trust in your and believe that in you we can do all things. Hear these and all our confessions of sin this day.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

Holy God, we come to you seeking guidance. We have many issues which we do not understand. The world as we know it continues to evolve and we have a hard time adjusting to all that is confronting us. We lift up those who are troubled by the recent actions of the General Assembly of the PCUSA. Be with them in their anguish and reassure them that you are always stronger than any human alienation. Help them navigate through the changes in the church they love. Be with those who celebrate the most recent actions of the GA. May they use this time as an opportunity to reach out to those who disagree with them and offer comfort, understanding, and support. This is not a time of celebration but a time of reconciliation. Be with our brothers and sisters in Israel and Palestine. May your Spirit breath in fresh ways to bring reconciliation where there has been anguish and war for so long.