



Method: Our Wesleyan Way Worship Series

Sermon Title: "The Catholic Spirit"
1 Corinthians 3:1-9—16 February 2014
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

A Prayer from John Wesley:

We offer up again our souls and bodies to you to be governed, not by our will, but yours. O let it be ever the ease and joy of our hearts, to be under the conduct of your unerring wisdom, to follow your counsels, and to be ruled in all things by your holy will. And let us never distrust your abundant kindness and tender care over us; whatsoever it is you would have us to do or to suffer in this world; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Hear the day's lesson for the day:

1 And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, 3 for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? 4 For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?

5 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7 So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 8 The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. 9 For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building (1 Corinthians 3:1-9).

In United States' history, there came a time when there was a transition between republicanism and democracy. These terms do not reflect with much precision the way we use the words republican or democrat, but rather reveal a philosophy that guided the early years of American. Republicanism feared a society built on self-interest rather than on virtue. As the Western United States began to open up, and also in cities, self-interest reigned supreme. It was this self-interest that signaled the change from republicanism to democracy. In terms of personality it indicated the country had moved from the style of Thomas Jefferson to that of Andrew Jackson. Or . . . America



had refocused from a concern for the whole of the colonies to the defense of an individual. Benjamin Franklin's quotation nicely sums up the viewpoint: "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately" (alternate quotation: "If we do not hang together, we shall surely hang separately").

Something like this contention of individual rights, or at least points of view occurred in Corinth if we read Paul and guess about the church's context. Paul is working to counter parties in the Corinthian community formed around claims of superior wisdom ascribed to several religious teachers. Paul's response to this situation has been to deny that human wisdom, however exalted, has any ability to attain reliable knowledge of God (chap. 1). Paul argues instead that it is the Holy Spirit that equips human beings to know God (chap. 2), rather than rhetorical-philosophical cleverness (*Feasting on the Word: Year A*). Here Paul suggests that it is not allegiance to any one follower that is important, but rather the allegiance to God in Christ that makes the difference. Paul gently—or not so gently—chides the Corinthian church and writes:

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We can do a much useful thinking on Paul's teaching 2000 years later. Which teachers are the best—the most dependable and successful—still divides today's churches. Paul offers practical wisdom about such claims. Our fragment of the biblical text also asks us to ponder the main concerns of ministry. We seek to make new disciples and strengthen existing ones; but how do we do it? Paul suggests that formation is less about informing, and more about drawing people into a particular way of life in community (adapted from *Feasting on the Word: Year A*). So the message we sane church folk send to the greater



culture/society/public is an important one to the cause of Christ—and too often church bickering sends the wrong message.

Our children and teens contain one such sub-culture. Kenda Creasy Dean in her book, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, offers an image of teenage religiosity. She suggests the faith of America's teens is “not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school. One more thing: we're responsible.” She thinks American Christians' emphasis on “a do-good, feel-good spirituality” at the expense of deep discipleship may cost us a rising generation. How, then, can religious leaders and teachers instill what Dean calls a “consequential faith”—i.e., a faith that bears fruit for the long haul?

Dean then identifies four influences teens need: a personal encounter with God, a strong church or youth group, a sense of being called to duty, and hope for the future. But the disenchantment of our teens also extends itself to teen's next older generation.

On 14 February 2014 I noticed this in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*:

DEAR ABBY: About a year ago, my husband, “Scott,” started attending church. He had never gone in the few years we dated.

We discussed our feelings about religion before we got engaged. He comes from a family that attended church every Sunday and believes in God. I was raised the exact opposite; I'm an atheist. I told Scott that if we had children, I would be OK with him taking them to church, but I would not join them. It bothered him a little, but we talked it over and moved on. After a difficult year that led to some mild depression (for which Scott sought help), he started going to church. I was happy for him because it seemed to help him.

After a few weeks he asked me to go with him. I went several times, but felt uncomfortable. I feel like a fraud sitting in the pew. Scott says he “wants my support” and that means attending with him. I suspect he's embarrassed to be there without his wife.

I do not enjoy it. I have been offended by some of the messages that were imparted, and I would prefer having a couple of hours to myself on Sundays. Abby, what should I do? Is there any middle ground here?--FEELING COERCED IN SAN DIEGO



Much of what our secular world opposes in the obscure doctrinal bickering that occurs between churches. Are you pre-millennial or post? Can a person fall from grace or not? And so on and so on and so on I like the way that John Wesley handled this squabbling in the 18th century which fought about religion in many of the same ways that we do now. In 1742 Wesley published a pamphlet titled “*The Character of a Methodist.*” Here he emphasized the distinction between essential beliefs of the Christian faith and mere opinions.

Wesley believed that a few vital doctrines could unite Christians and yet they could have differing opinions about a range of other less important things, such as mode of baptism or style of worship. He wrote, “The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort. But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think.”

The word “catholic” in our sermon title simply means “universal” as we mean it in the Apostle’s Creed. Wesleyans or Methodists have a tendency to be non-doctrinal. For this reason we offer our secular culture a sense of God that is more invitational than combative. Wesley divided essential from nonessential beliefs which he called “opinions.” Love can unify Christians, but believers need not have identical beliefs.

Christian pastor, A. W. Tozer, wrote in his *The Pursuit of God*:

Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshipers [meeting] together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become ‘unity’ conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.

Or perhaps we could understand “a catholic spirit” in the sense of a



Peanuts cartoon. Lucy demanded that Linus change TV channels, bullying him with her fist if he didn't. "What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over?" he asks.

"These five fingers," says Lucy. "Individually they're nothing but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold."

"Which channel do you want?" asks Linus.

Turning away, he looks at his fingers and says, "Why can't you guys get organized like that?" (Attributed to Charles Schultz).