

Food for the Journey

8 March 2015: Lent 3 (Year B)

First United Methodist Church of Arlington, TX

“Sharing in the Journey as Worship”

Preaching Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

“Everyone ought to worship God according to his own inclinations,
and not to be constrained by force” (Flavius Josephus, 37–100 CE).

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Our lesson is from Paul and it is a real letter or epistle. Paul wants the rather new congregation in Corinth to do certain things and not to do other things. It is a letter that admonishes, reproveth, cautions, lectures, rebukes, scolds, and warns . . . well you get the idea. Paul declares his objective when he writes: “what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 14:37).

Today’s lesson comes near the beginning of the letter. Prior to our reading about the cross is the greeting to the congregation and Paul’s thanksgiving for them. Then Paul appeals to them concerning their divisions. He has heard about these disagreements from “Chloe’s people.” It seems as if people in those days were “name droppers” as we are today. We could think of it this way: Apollos baptized some, Cephas Peter baptized others, Paul baptized a few he admits, and others said they belonged to the Christ clique. All of this is to say that the church Corinthians divided into evident and recognizable in-groups and that people identified each group by an individual leader. Divisions in the church are anathema/abomination to God. This circumstance of division was no doubt the principal occasion for the letter. Thus here in chapter 1 we have what we could call the primary theological subject with which Paul begins his doctrinal salvo—splitting the church into separate circles. May we hear the day’s lesson:

18 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. 19 For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through

the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength (1 Corinthians 1:18-25).

Paul seems convicted to write to the church about some individuals and their pride in their wisdom, strength, or high repute. These features from Paul's point of view are not what they seem. To those who are perishing Paul notes that these tokens of human achievement are simply symbols of death rather than symbols of life. If someone has power rather than weakness, according to some of the local Corinthian church members, then that person is a winner so to speak. Certainly, it appears to the Corinthians—and with the force of firm belief—that their spiritual health and their pretentious pride depends directly upon the high repute of those who baptized them.

Yet Paul invalidates this view by proclaiming the gospel: through the cross God shrinks wisdom, strength, and high repute making each futile for people's salvation. In other words, justification and sanctification arrive from divine precincts rather than human achievements or accomplishments. When we count on any human action to save us, then we fall into the sin of pride. Part of the function of worship is to remind us on a weekly or more habitual basis that God is God and we are not.

Martin Luther wrote that sin comes in two guises—pride and despair. The sin of pride displays itself in human self-deception that assumes we can live life fully and meaningfully apart from God's authority. As Proverbs 16:18 puts it: "Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall."

However, concerning despair—this concept seems harder to grasp. Despair, contrary to those who in pride say they have no need of God, takes the opposite tack. Despairing people

might say, “My life is so hopeless that even God is of no use to me.” Either way, in the sin of pride or in the sin of despair, people cut themselves off from God. This is sin’s essence: “to cut ourselves off from God” or “to alienate ourselves from God.” What makes us weary is trying to control everything. Jesus’ gift of rest means we surrender to God’s grace in Christ. Thus it is no accident that both Sabbath rest and faithful community worship occur on the same day.

Of course, we admire self-reliance, but it can be a trait that destroys. Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.” In other words, surrender your pride/despair to Jesus who can help. Thus, giving ourselves over to Jesus is when surrender means “Victory in Jesus!”

Our First Corinthian passage today lies at the heart of Paul’s grasp of the gospel. Paul rightly reminds the readers in Corinth and even here in Arlington on a sleepy daylight savings change Sunday that the power of the cross extends across the ages, passing judgment not only on the Greek confidence in wisdom/knowledge and the Jewish assurance in signs of power. In trying to understand God and where we fit into the cosmos, the cross persistently foils all human approaches to enter into right relationships with God—on our own. The gospel insists upon opening up its own way.

In our *Soul Feast* book that many are using this Lenten season, Marjorie Thompson writes in her chapter about worship that it gathers us in the spirit. She also notes that Søren Kierkegaard offers a helpful worship analogy. She remarks, without saying so, that worship is not simply a spectator sport.

In worship we often conceive of the leaders as the prompters, God as an actor, and the congregation as the audience. But according to Søren Kierkegaard’s *Purity of Heart is To Will One Thing* (Trans. Douglas Steere; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948, pp. 180-181) God is the audience in worship. That is everything we, the worshipers, do, say, sing, read, pray, is for God, for God’s honor, and for God’s enjoyment.

The leaders in the chancel—the choir and liturgists—help things to happen decently and in order. They set the tone and keep us together. It might be one person, with or without an instrument. It might be a full choir and orchestra. Prompters remind us what to say, when, and how to say it or sing it. If they are skilled, we soon forget about them entirely, focusing on God alone. Thus:

God = audience

Leaders = prompters

Congregation = actors

In worship we are more than spectators; we are those who perform for God through our reading, singing, and praying. Worship grounds us. Worship connects us. Worship allows us to be together and not divide ourselves into factions or parties. Worship saves our best for God.

Fred Craddock, who died this week (6 March 2015) was an eminent professor and preacher, tells the story of how he once returned to the little Tennessee church he attended as a child. He noticed right away that new stained glass windows—very expensive and well out the fiscal range of the congregation’s budget—had been installed in the sanctuary since the last time he had been there. Craddock wondered how this little church could afford such beautiful stained glass windows. At the bottom of each window, the name of the donor was inscribed. Since he wasn’t familiar with any of the names, he commented to a friend, “You must have had a lot of new folks join this church since I was a boy. I don’t recognize a single name.”

“Oh, those people aren’t members here,” was the reply. “This town hasn’t grown a bit since you were a child; and neither has our church. These windows came from a company all the way over in Italy. They were made for a church in St. Louis; but when they arrived there, none of them fit. The company said they were sorry and they would make new windows; and they told the church in St. Louis to sell them wherever they could. So we bought their windows.”

Somewhat puzzled at this, Craddock asked, “But . . . why didn’t you remove the names?”

“Well, we thought about it. But we’re just a little church, and we decided that we’d like to sit here on Sunday morning surrounded by the names of some people other than ourselves.”

Craddock then asked, “Are you going to put nameplates on them for the folks in this church?”

“We took that up at a church meeting,” his friend informed him, “and decided to leave those names there?”

“Why?” asked Dr. Craddock.

The friend replied, “It’s good for our church to know that there are a lot of saints in God’s kingdom that we don’t even know” (Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001, p. 138).

It is this kind of thinking about worship that keeps us together and safe from party spirit and therefore party strife. Thanks be to God! Amen.