

1 Corinthians 1, Mt. 4:12-23, Jan. 2020 Unity and discipleship

This last week, several of you mentioned an article in the Duluth News Tribune to me that appeared last Monday concerning a small, struggling Methodist Church in a Twin Cities suburb. I have been assured by Methodist colleagues that the article was not necessarily strictly accurate but the gist of it was that as this church was slowly dying a painful death due to lack of members and funds, grief took the form of divisiveness and factionalism, and one group of the congregation was essentially being disenfranchised or invited to leave: the older members. Again, I am assured this wasn't quite so, but it certainly is revealing of struggles within congregations in these days of institutional church decline. And as a former Methodist, I have been attuned to their larger denominational struggle, which appears to be headed towards a definitive split of what was once the United Methodist Church into two Methodist church bodies. Our own ELCA has had plenty of bad press over the years, but while grateful that *we* weren't on the hot seat this time around, I have been saddened to witness this strife within a denomination for which I have deep respect and affection. On Thursday of this past week, there was another opportunity to think about denominations and divisions, as I attended the Uncapped Theology event, along with several other congregational members. This is actually a series of events designed to foster understanding and respect, specifically between Catholics and Lutherans, and it's been both engaging and informative each time. But I'd have to say that among the take-aways for me, at least, has been the reality of how deeply divided we actually are over some fairly significant issues. There was a reason the Reformation occurred in the 16th Century, just as there has

been a reason for all the denominational splits that have happened since then, including some within our own church body, as well as others. Nevertheless, I'm a bit struck by this irony---that this past week was the annual week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and that our lesson from 1 Corinthians today is all about unity. The opening line, in fact, states, "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." Frankly, I'm not sure how well the Christian church has done in this regard in the 2000 years since St. Paul wrote these words. I would rather fear that both within the church and in the witness we provide to those outside the church, that factionalism, divisiveness and polarization are more the norm. Which can't be good.

Now you might argue that we as Church are simply a reflection and microcosm of a divided, fractured world, and that is certainly true. This same past week, newspaper headlines have focused on polarization amongst East High School parents in regards to changing school boundaries; of heated argument on the Iron Range at a meeting about gun control policy; and of course, national headlines are dominated by the impeachment trial presently underway. There are many things to dislike about our present political climate, but for me, one of the most disagreeable is that regardless of what the issue is or what side we might stand on it, it seems to be almost a foregone conclusion that our leaders will inevitably divide over the issue along partisan, party lines. I find that appalling; is there no such thing as individual conscience anymore? Are objective standards of justice and fairness completely overcome by red and blue allegiances? If so,

it is difficult to see how we can make any progress working together towards a common good, as the polarization is both broad and deep. Do you ever wonder *why* things are this way?

Some would suggest that the rate of change in our times and our world lead to such divisiveness and polarity, and perhaps that's so. If one could somehow compress the rate of change within national or world history into a simple visual, certainly that rate has exploded in recent centuries and decades. And that has not only happened on a large scale level. Even within this small community of Knife River---which I sometimes regard as a bit of a Shangri La amidst a tumultuous and angry world---there are nevertheless changes and conflicts. As there are whenever more than one person gathers for anything. But as we are looking towards our annual meeting and also participating in a mission planning process, we are trying to gain a clearer understanding of this community and this congregation as part of our journey. I have been learning some new things about trends here, trends which most of you may already know. But, this community has experienced very definitive changes over the last decades. Originally a community of Scandinavian anglers and their descendants, we have begun to attract new people to the area, often older, of some means and education, who are drawn by the natural beauty and by the sense of community here. There is also a growing influx of Apostolic Lutherans within this community; I'm not saying that's a bad thing, but they generally are not terribly interactive with other community groups or churches, and that's a fact that impacts us. And now more VRBOs are coming into play, making housing scarcer and bringing in even more tourists. And there are a number of newer and creative endeavors underway,

from the Julebyen to the Heritage Center to our Columbarium and so on. That's a lot of change to cope with and/or embrace for a small community, and of course, that leads to some disagreement and conflict. Completely understandable and not necessarily a negative, *unless* it turns into angry partisanship and distrust, in which case that also impacts us, as the church within this community. Angry partisanship and distrust are obviously things we want to avoid! So, in both secular and churchly arenas, there is significant division and polarity, and this is not what St. Paul envisioned or what Christ prayed for at the Last Supper. Maybe the lesson history is presently teaching us in the decline of the Church as it has been, is that if this factionalism becomes too overpowering, it can pretty much destroy a congregation or even a denomination, and no good witness can possibly result. So, what to do?

Both Paul and Jesus have some wise counsel for us, but let's first take a look at what Jesus has to teach us in the calling of his disciples, portrayed for us in Matthew 4, today's Gospel lesson. Putting in one of my little plugs for theological geography here, recall again how the place where Jesus chooses to begin his ministry impacts with *whom* he begins it. Matthew very specifically informs us that Jesus is at Capernaum, by the Sea of Galilee; he is living in the northern section of ancient Palestine, where just good-enough Jews lived. Between this northern section of Galilee and the southern section of Judah, was the middle section of Samaria, where the Jews were not even close to good enough, and in the southern section, Judah, was where the capitol of Jerusalem and the all important Temple were placed. The truly good, well educated, and most observant Jews lived there. But Jesus doesn't live there! If he had, he might have called quite a different

looking group of disciples, right? I mean, scribes and lawyers and priests and rabbis would have abounded in that area. But instead, he's in Galilee, among those just barely good-enough Jews, and he lives on the Sea of Galilee. Which, incidentally, was not nearly as large as our Lake Superior, but it was called a Sea, nonetheless. Well, we coastal dwellers know who lives on seacoasts---commercial anglers! Men, for the most part, who make a living off of fishing. So, what kind of men would these first followers of Jesus have been?

An intriguing discovery of a 1st Century fishing boat found by the Sea of Galilee back in 1986 gives a few answers. It was built from low quality materials and held together with wooden plugs and resin; these were not wealthy people fishing out of yachts. As the researchers wrote, "it is a moving testimony to ingenuity born of perpetual hardship." Commercial fishing was not an easy way to make a living on *our* inland Sea shore; lives were lost; times were hard. The same was true in 1st C. Galilee. It involved perpetual hardship. This was not a job for the weak, the risk-adverse, or the easily discouraged. In fact, successful anglers needed to be practical, adaptive, and resourceful. And it may well be that practical, adaptive, resourceful people were just the kind of people Jesus needed to build something---namely the Christian church---out of nearly nothing---a small group of 12 mismatched apostles. Thinking about this reminded me of one of the current catch words for thriving churches, and that word is "nimble". In a changing, contentious world, the church needs to be nimble---practical, adaptive, resourceful. As my husband suggested, this is a word that conjures up a gymnast more than a statue. We may need to be nimble, like gymnasts; or like anglers, adjusting to all

kinds of factors of wind, weather, and availability of fish that are out of their hands. So, as we think about our mission, as we reflect on the year that has been in our annual meeting next Sunday and look towards the year to come, we might want to find hope in the fact that Jesus initially calls not super smart professional religious people, but rather anglers as his first four apostles. And we might also want to consider how to position ourselves nimbly, how we can adopt a gymnast-like posture that is practical, adaptive, and resourceful, to make an effective witness amidst a changing and polarized community and world. Doesn't sound like an easy thing to do; I'm no gymnast, but so often God's calls are a stretch. I would certainly rather do things as they've always been done, and I'd prefer to have *my* own way all the time; but that doesn't serve the common good or make a persuasive witness for Christ. Which we are called to do. To be adaptable and nimble, in the spirit of our angling forebears here and following the example of the first apostles. And to seek unity beyond and beneath disagreements and controversy and conflicts, a unity that allows us to do Christ's ministry with a same mind and purpose, as Paul exhorts us. Here's where Paul's wisdom comes in. That unity is found, according to Paul, in the cross of Christ. He ends this lesson by writing, "Christ sent me to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power." The cross of Christ is symbolic of God's own humble willingness to take on human flesh, of God's own sacrificial willingness to suffer for the sake of love; that cross speaks of the reality of forgiveness, mercy, and second chances, without which, none of us can stand. For me, this unity in the cross, in the love of God, is best exemplified at the rail of Holy Communion. As we come up to kneel

together, to partake of the one body and blood of Christ, to be one family of God, I am always moved. I am moved because I know that those kneeling side by side may vote differently, may think differently about the future of this Knife River community, may have different opinions about how our church kitchen is best utilized, may have very different socioeconomic backgrounds, but none of that matters. None of it. At that altar rail, we are all equally struggling and in need of God's mercy and healing, all equally broken and looking to know the love of God and the love of belonging to a community. At the Lord's table, we are all equally hungering for the bread of life from Christ's own hands to provide balm for our souls and nurture for our spiritual vigor. We are all one in Christ here, and that is our essential and indestructible unity, because it is a gift from God. As our creedal song, "In Christ Alone" states, "Here in the cross of Christ I stand." We stand together, for Christ's sake and for the sake of serving the world which God so loves. Amen.