

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
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The Foolishness That Unites Us

January 23, 2011
3rd Sunday after Epiphany
Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

I like to think of myself as a continuing student of Newfoundland English. As I will always be a CFA, “come from away,” I have been learning this and that over my thirty years exposure to the local language, dialects and vocabulary. I find the expressions here rich and intriguing for a number of reasons.

Take for example, the fact that this is the only place I've ever lived where the word “sin” can be used in a non-theological, non-religious context. For example, someone sees a dog get hit by a car in the road and says, “that's a sin, la, that poor thing.” I don't think that's a theological reflection on what God thinks about dogs or drivers that hit them. I think it means, “what a pity!” Now you can disagree with me on this, I am still formulating my understanding of the language. Or if you say something true but unkind about someone else, even if they deserve it, someone here might say to you, “that's a sin for you,” which may or may not be an actual sin.

Another example is when someone disagrees with you, or you try to tell a joke that doesn't make any sense to the other person, they might say, “Ah, go on with your foolishness.” If this phrase is used in the middle of a serious discussion, it could simply be dismissive. However, if it is used in misunderstanding a joke or a point, it could simply mean the opposite of what is said, namely, “stop your foolish talk.” The phrase, “go on,” rarely is an encouragement to continue on, in fact, it is the opposite. It means something like “I don't believe a word of it” or “you're pulling my leg.”

Such foolishness can become the subject of linguistic debate, but that is not my purpose this morning, as you already know. I am trying to get to Paul's use of the word “foolishness” as he refers to the one of the central events of the faith, and how others perceive the faith.

But first remember that Paul is talking about the Corinthian church. They were having problems of a wide variety. In the first chapter Paul was addressing the divisions over leadership. He does not say what started those divisions, but in the end what happened was some claimed one leader as their leader, thus dismissing the rest, and causing conflict. The TNIV

translates it: I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Peter, I follow Christ, literally in the Greek “I *am of* Paul, or Apollos or Peter or Christ”. And there may have been more than those four groups. Apparently part of the focus of who followed who, had to do with the leader who had baptized the believer. So Paul was glad that he had not baptized any or on second thought, many. So there were divisions in the body of Christ over baptism right from the beginning.

And just as a footnote to this passage, without whining. It is not easy to be a church leader. We seek simply to serve the church, but we do make mistakes. I do. I have gone through high highs and low lows in church. You probably have too. I have experienced profound support in several congregations. I have also experienced a congregation or two who wanted to run me out of town, although I resigned before that took place. I have had many compliments with how I have performed as a pastor. I have also received criticism, e.g. from a woman in Western Canada who told me, “Everything I hate about the church I see in you.” This was probably one of the most painful things I had ever heard. Now forgiveness has been extended to her, and the fact is that she felt free enough or safe enough with me to make this point, but it has taken several years to recover from the sting of it.

I am sure Paul and Apollos and Peter all experienced hurt (emotional, physical, social hurt) both from the church and from the community. It was part of the risk of starting something new. Paul evidently was told often that he wasn't an eloquent or wise speaker. This is boldly put in 1:17 but also in 2:4 and throughout the letters to the Corinthians as well as in Acts 17:18 where the Athenians ask each other, “What is this babbling trying to say?” We should remember that Paul knew several languages and it is possible that Greek was one of the weaker ones in his command, at least compared to those who practiced oration as their profession or career.

So Paul simply says to the people, that we are here together to worship Christ, to be his people together. I may not speak well. I may not even hold your attention. But the point of me speaking is to draw you to the Good News that Jesus loves you, wants you to forsake your rebellion against God, and choose to give your life to God and follow Jesus' way, then live it.

So Paul wants everyone who hears to know that this is all about Jesus, and not about the flaws of fellow Christians and Christian leaders, which abound

in every church and in every time. "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?" No, when we get our focus off of Jesus and on the flaws of one another we have lost an essential of being the church together. Help us, Lord, to forgive one another, to be built up in what we can agree upon.

This brings us back to the discussion that flows from verse 10: I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.

What can this mean? We know that we simply don't agree on everything. We know that when you put two or more people together, you get politics; and diverse opinions. We know that perfection in this world is not attainable. But what we can agree upon are the essentials of the faith. I think you have heard the expression: in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, diversity and in all things, charity or love.

So, for example, we agree on the Apostles' Creed as a basis for Christian belief, and say this together as we take communion. The Creed was developed out of a need for finding a statement for expression of essentials, in an age that could not agree on the basics.

Paul says an even more basic thing than this. He says what we consider to be the essentials for faith, while many others around us in the larger community will consider it "foolishness." The cross, where Jesus was tortured to death, is the main focus for this. Many say, then and now, that the cross as the instrument which gave us the possibility for relationship with the living God is utterly unbelievable. But for those who do believe the cross is God's answer to all the obstacles between God and us, it is the power of God. This is not because believing it makes it so. Believing it appropriates it for you. This is just as receiving a gift thankfully from someone makes it our own.

So we know again that we have a family, not by our choice, but by our parents' and grandparents'. We have the family of God, not by our choice, but by Jesus' choice, by God the Father's choice, by the Holy Spirit's choice. So our challenge is to work together, love one another, get creative in bringing both the Message and the Loving Actions to others so they will have a chance to receive the gift as well, as one beggar gives food to another.

The way this works is by talking openly and honestly, regularly forgiving one another and the church, by being aware of our own lack of perspective, and lack, and by receiving the love and grace of our Lord as often as possible, preferably on a daily basis, by reading Scripture, praying, speaking words that encourage and by being patient and kind. I still struggle with all these things. It's not easy for me. I wish it were. Sometimes the hardest work is to acknowledge the faults that are mine. Sometimes the hardest work is listening to others and not responding defensively but with maturity and grace.

I trust you will continue to pray for the church, in its many expressions here in St. John's, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Brethren, United, Salvation Army, Pentecostal, Vineyard and others. We should also pray for our sister church in Dartmouth, St. Andrew's Presbyterian, as they are in transition from the Minister of 41 years to someone else. We need to pray for one another here, for the Kirk downtown, and for the new church coming in Paradise or CBS.

Help us, Lord,

Let us pray.