

**Third Sunday After Epiphany**  
**Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish,**  
**Saint Francisville, LA**  
**26 January 2020**

**1 Corinthians 1:10-18**

Several years ago when a Group of Missionaries from our Diocese went on Mission to Honduras they decided to travel in caravan to avoid getting lost. At some point, however, the group was divided as one of the drivers became confused and began to follow the wrong car. In all fairness to the driver, the car he was following was the same make and the same color of the car he should have been following. After about two hours of following this car in the wrong direction, the driver began to read signs leading him to the Capital City, Tegucigalpa. It was at this point that he realized that he was lost. Needless to say, it took him about 4 hours of driving in the opposite direction to finally reach his friends. The team decided to prevent this problem again by making a cross on the back of each car with colorful tape. If you did not see the cross ahead of you, you were going in the wrong direction.

In today's reading from 1 Corinthians Paul describes a problem with this congregation. There are divisions and quarrels among them. Parishioners are not of one mind and one purpose. They have drawn the battle lines and have created factions within the group, each claiming allegiance to a particular teacher. They all began following Christ, but at some point in their corporate life they got lost and began to follow individual leaders, instead of Christ himself. They were following the messengers instead of the messenger-sender and the message itself. In the meantime, the divisions and quarrels have begun to affect their corporate life as a church: their worship, fellowship, service to others, etc.

There seems to be at least four factions within this church. Each claims allegiance to a particular leader, even though the leader himself has little to do with the inappropriate way in which his name or his teachings are used. One group calls itself the "Apollo" group. Apollo was known for his great gifts of preaching, his high intellect, his remarkable use of rhetoric, and his vast wisdom. Folks who claim to belong to Apollo desire to achieve a deeper level of spirituality or religiosity through wisdom and learning. You may remember that Corinth is in former Greek territory and the pursuit of "sophia" or wisdom through philosophy, drama, and the arts was extremely important. The followers of the Apollo group may want a church that is more integrated into Hellenistic culture. They may want a more relevant and "modern" church. Paul does not argue against this position necessarily, but does remind them that they are following the wrong path. They are going in a different direction. It is not through the achievement of wisdom that we become better Christians. We do not obtain salvation through the cultivation of

the mind. Salvation can only come through Christ on the cross. Rather than following the Cross of Christ, they are following the culture of the day with all its mandates and all its expectations. This is the wrong direction for Paul.

The next group calls itself the “Peter” group. The passage gives us little information about this group, but we can infer from Acts of the Apostles and other writings of Paul that perhaps these folks believed in the necessity of obeying the Jewish instruction, known as Torah, of which religious law derives. These folks believed that circumcision was necessary, that the purity laws and festivals needed to be observed, that there was a necessity of good works to obtain salvation (righteousness before God), etc. Paul believes that these folks are also following the wrong car. They look to Abraham and to Moses, rather than to Jesus and his Cross. They believe that salvation is a matter of doing; making yourself more deserving of God; doing the right prayers and sacrifices, wearing the right clothes, worshiping in the right way. They believe proper religion is a matter of offering the right sacrifice and associating with the right people. Paul reminds this group, as he will do in great detail in this letter later on, that Salvation through Jesus is only obtained through the cross, and not through obedience to the Jewish Law.

There is another Group called the “Christ” group. The problem with this group is that they feel superior and more righteous than everyone in the Church and arrogantly call Christ their Messiah. Just theirs! They believe they understand Christ fully and only they are following Christ the right way. Worse yet, they believe that only those who belong to their group know Christ fully. This group may be trying hard to be sincere in their faith and practice, but they have began to exclude others they see as less faithful or less deserving. Paul reminds them that the cross of Christ is the most inclusive symbol in Christian doctrine. Christ died for all, not just for an elite few. When you focus on the cross of Christ you soon realize that the cross becomes the antidote for arrogance and self-righteousness. The cross points us to the young man dying there and to the purpose of his sacrifice, which is none other than to call all nations, tribes, and peoples to himself, that the entire world may come “within the reach of his loving embrace”. There is no room for elitism and class struggles within the body of Christ.

The last group, the so called “Paul” group may be a rhetorical construct of Paul, but the reading does not give us much information about these folks. If this group exists we can perhaps say that this group is appealing to tradition as received from Paul himself and is rebelling against inculturation (Apollo’s Group), a return to Judaism (Peter’s Group), or the schism of further fragmentation (Christ’s Group). Paul makes it clear, however, that these folks are placing their allegiance on the wrong person. He is not the Messiah, Christ is! He asks them, “Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” Paul is very uncomfortable with the personality cults that have developed in Corinth. The Church is fragmenting Christ with their divisions and quarrels. He

challenges them to look beyond even Paul to the Cross of Christ, the only symbol of Christian unity.

So, what is the charge Paul gives this church and us today? That all be in agreement (one mind) and that there be no divisions among them (one purpose). In other words, realize that you don't belong to Apollo, Cephas or even Paul. You belong to Christ and he is not divided. It was Christ who was crucified for you. Any appeal to authority on the basis of any platform other than the cross of Christ empties the cross of Christ of its power, and it is ultimately Non-Christian. Neither Sophia (Wisdom), nor Torah (Law), nor tradition, nor culture, nor a charismatic leader can replace the Cross of Christ. If you allow anything to replace the cross of Christ, you will wonder aimlessly following the wrong car, following idols that don't have the power to save. Focus on the cross. Everything else is insignificant by comparison!

My friends we live in a fragmented world! We have so much partisanship in our church today that the body of Christ is being fragmented over and over again. The question then becomes, "How do we achieve Christian unity in a fragmented world?" Paul today gives us the answer: Focus on the cross of Christ. This should be the center of our theology, the reason for our worship, the foundation of our ministry, the unifying symbol in our fellowship, and the cause of our hope and prayer life. Let us focus on the cross of Christ! We need to seek unity in the essentials and diversity in the non-essentials. It all comes to the same question of authority. "From where should the Church derive its authority, its power, and its missional impetus?" If the answer is the culture, we are following the wrong car. If the answer is works righteousness or doing more, we are following the wrong car. If the answer is an elitist appeal to congregationalism (the idea that we must only worry about what affects our local congregation), we are following the wrong car. If the solution is tradition as in "this is the way we have always done it" or its cousin, "We've never done it this way before," we are following the wrong car and we are utterly lost. My friends, the answer is plain and simple: The cross of Christ is the primary source of Christian authority. Basic to our theology is the principle that Christ died, Christ is Risen, and Christ will come again. It all starts with the cross, and without it we are hopelessly lost!

Let us pray:

Dear God, help your church to be one as you and the Father are one. We ask you this in your holy name, amen!