

What Makes a Good House?

As I said in my annual report, I believe that preaching is not just a preacher's task, it is a collaboration of the people of God. The living word of God is proclaimed when we, a community of faith, work together for good as the body of Christ. In other words, a healthy and faithful congregation makes for strong preaching. In the same way, the communion happens in the actions of the community. When we celebrate communion we don't eat the bread as individuals; we share the bread of life as a community. Many people believe that Communion refers to the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, but experience tells me that communion occurs in the transformation of the people through sharing bread and wine in the name and presence of Christ. So we can say that communion is not limited to one Sunday a month; it continues every Sunday, every day, as we strive to build a healthy and faithful congregation.

I think the apostle Paul knew a lot about communion and community, and he was aware of their importance to the growing Christian church. So he wrote letters to the early Christians in Corinth regarding how to make a good community of faith. For example, Paul was concerned about how they practiced communion, in 1 Corinthians 11:20-22, "When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?" They practiced the communion like it was the world's worst potluck, without love and care for one another, because they lost the point of communion – remembering Jesus and following his life and ministry. So, throughout his letters to the church in Corinth, Paul put emphasis on the crucified Christ who is the foundation of the church.

To make his point, Paul uses the metaphor of a skilled master builder: "Each builder must choose with care how to build on it" Paul is urging that each person involved in creating, running, or sustaining a congregation be intentional with the process of church-building. When you construct a building, the foundation is

poured and once it is set, each person adds his or her own expertise. Carpenters frame out the house, an electrician adds the wiring, and plumbers add the plumbing, and so on, until the building is completed. If even one person does their job carelessly, the building will not function well when it is complete.

In the process of creating and sustaining a congregation, Paul reminds us to take the same care. Paul is urging intentionality, with a deep awareness that we build on the foundation of Jesus Christ. A foundation establishes a building's footprint. Paul asks the church to consider the question, 'what kind of footprint did Jesus leave for us to build upon?' Paul's metaphor implores the church to carry that footprint through to every aspect of its life together. Is our congregation being intentional in showing God's love and justice as revealed in Jesus Christ in every way it can? Are we living God's love and justice in our worship life together? Are we demonstrating it in the way we govern our congregation? In the way we govern our denomination? Are we living God's love and justice in the way we include our youngest children and our oldest adults in the life of the congregation? In the way we welcome a stranger?

In today's passage, Paul is speaking out of a desire to repair a division within the Corinthian church. Do division and disagreement over leadership build upon the foundation that Jesus laid for the church? Paul argues that it does not. Paul reminds them to remain unified, to remember that they have only one true leader – Jesus Christ – and that they must take care to build up the church that is still new and fragile.

I wonder why they were divided. They lacked for nothing, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:4-7, they had been enriched in Christ Jesus, in speech and knowledge of every kind, and they were not lacking in any spiritual gift. They had everything they needed. There seemed no reason for them not to grow, and not to be united. Moreover, they were a people who loved wisdom, but the wisdom they were seeking was not the wisdom Paul was proclaiming. In many times in his letters to the church in Corinth, Paul distinguishes between the world's wisdom and God's wisdom, and he makes it clear that it is the world's wisdom which they love, not God's wisdom which is the crucified Christ.

Paul was deeply concerned that the Corinthians used wisdom as a means of claiming status over someone else who was also called and also saved; wisdom was used not to help, care or love for one another, but to boast, to be arrogant and eventually to separate the people. So Paul often warned them not to boast about anything except being in the Lord.

Paul was concerned about their division as he heard them saying 'I belong to Paul', and 'I belong to Apollos'. Here we need to read between the lines. Neither Paul nor Apollos promoted their division. There must have been a few other people in the church who had power to influence the others with their knowledge and wealth. Most Corinthian believers were not wise, not powerful, and not of noble birth, but some were, and they tried to import their worldly status into their Christian lives.

Recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of the social divisions in the church in Corinth and has posited the disproportionate influence of a small elite group within the church, whose attitude to their social inferiors and class-oriented interpretations of the Christian faith underlie many of the issues addressed in the first letter to the Corinthians. . It must have been frustrating for Paul, who had been brought up in the world's wisdom and had fought so hard to find his own wisdom in Christ. He could see so clearly how the Corinthians were missing the mark, and all he could do was visit and write, and give the best advice he could, kind of like a master builder watching a stubborn friend build a house without consulting the blueprint.

And, like a builder telling a friend that you need to get the studs in before you hang the drywall, Paul shook the Corinthian believers saying, "Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God". He exhorted them all, especially the powerful group not to change others but to be changed with the cross, where the old rules of class and status ended and a new rule of grace began...

As we celebrate our new relationship today, let us be reminded of our firm foundation: Jesus Christ our Lord. On that foundation, together we are building God's house where everyone is welcome, where everyone is encouraged to share his or her gift, and where all are invited to grow in the power of God.