

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Third Sunday after Epiphany, Year A, January 22, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“Divisions Among Us”
1 Corinthians 1:10-18

by any estimation, the New Testament church in Corinth was a fantastically spiritual place; in no other of Paul’s letters do we hear as many references to the spiritual gifts that the church members there exhibited: prophesying, healing, speaking in tongues, and more; you would think that in such a place where there was such a powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit that people would have gotten along well with each other, right?; wrong!

in Corinth, it was oddly because of those spiritual gifts that people were not getting along well with each other; there were quarrels among them as they exercised a kind of spiritual one-upmanship; those speaking in tongues thought they were better than those prophesying; those performing healings thought they had the most important gift of all; and so on; what an example of human pride they exhibited by taking something God-given and trying and use it to further their own personal status

and to make things even worse, in addition to their jockeying over who had the best gift, they had formed themselves into divisive groups: there were Chloe’s people and Paul’s people, Apollos’ people and Cephas’ people, and Christ’s people, as if any one group of them could dare to claim that they belonged to Christ more than anyone else; Paul wrote two more letters to these same folks in Corinth (one of them has been lost, that’s why we only have two letters to the Corinthians in the Bible), but we’re not sure to what extent he was able to help them get over either their excess pride or their divisions

well, human pride and people dividing themselves into antagonistic groups are certainly not problems limited to the earliest days of the church; I think it would be quite fair to say, without taking sides with any person or party, that we have seen a lot of pride and divisiveness coming from almost every corner of our politics and society of late; take this weekend, for example: many people celebrated, but many other people also protested the new administration, showing just how divided we are as a nation; so let’s look back at how Paul tried to deal with those problems long ago, and see if he has anything we can use to better the situation we find

ourselves in these days

Paul's advice to the Corinthians was to appeal to them to look beyond their divisions and seek what they all had in common: he names Christ, the cross, and the power of God; and through the unity that such a common commitment provides, to seek Christ's purposes, rather than their own; he reminds them that they all share the same baptism, and from that commonality, they can and should find ways to build a unity of purpose

we can apply such advice in our dealings today with other Christians; Claire and I attended the monthly gathering of the Downtown Churches United last week; among the Baptists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Roman Catholics, and others who were present, there are major points of disagreement about how we worship, how we baptize, how we structure our church governance, and the types of issues and causes we feel most strongly about; but we put those differences aside to work together on the common purpose of serving people in Petersburg who are in need through the Hope Center--without any other agenda; and for each of us here today, we need to heed Paul's advice not to think our parish, our denomination, our religious liberalism or religious conservatism better than anyone else's; we can only work together within our similarities, wherever we can find them and whenever we can exercise them

but we can't stop there; our nation and our world are not solely Christian, and while we must always operate from our Christian understandings and with our Christian commitment, we must also be involved in the wider world; so we need to extrapolate from Paul, thinking more broadly as American citizens and as world citizens; we can apply his advice outside of the religious sphere in our dealings with other Americans in the public sphere and with other peoples in the international sphere; we can remind ourselves that, as Christians, even when dealing with people who are not Christian, we see all persons as created by God, and therefore we have to treat all persons as God's children; just as we can look at other Christians as fellow baptized persons, we can look at anyone as a fellow child of God; and from that commonality, we can and should look for ways to build a unity of purpose

despite the many differences in opinions, hopes, and fears that exist between whatever groupings you want to consider--religious; political; racial; ethnic; national; gender; economic; educational; generational; urban, suburban, or rural; undeveloped, developing, or developed, or anything else I've left out--it can only

help us to put aside divisions and seek common purposes; and it is probably helpful to even to stop using such labeling of people into groups altogether, and just deal with each other as individuals; I'm not presuming such common purposes are easy to find, but the process of working with others to discover common purposes is an important process; only time will tell to what extent we will be able to get over either our excess pride or our divisions

facing such large tasks as Paul has set to us, as Christians trying to avoid the pitfalls he outlined among the Corinthians, I turn to the *Book of Common Prayer* where I have found a helpful prayer *For the Human Family* (it is prayer # 3 on p. 815, please turn to it now); it does a good job of summarizing Paul's thinking as it applies to our place in our churches, to our place in our larger society, and to our place in the world at large; it outlines how we can proceed, and it reminds us of the aim we seek; as in all our prayers, the job may seem too big to handle; but that's why we pray, because we know we can only begin to accomplish any of this with God's help; so let us pray now together:

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.