

Division and Reconciliation: A Sermon

The following is perhaps the closest I've ever gotten to preaching a political sermon. It is also a good example of what to do if you misread the lectionary reading. The epistle text was actually from 1 Cor. 2, which I misread as 1 Cor. 12. Lesson? If you make a mistake, just keep on going. I had the reader read from 1 Cor. 12, and proceeded as if it was supposed to be that way. It turns out that 1 Cor. 12 works just fine as the epistle reading along with the OT passage from Isaiah and the gospel from the Sermon on the Mount.

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 112

Matthew 5:13-20

1 Corinthians 12:1-16



If it is not already obvious, we live in a divided culture these days. Whatever else you might think of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, her motto "Stronger Together" did not seem to work out very well. Although it was not his *official* campaign slogan, the guy who won had a slogan that seemed to work better: "We're going to build a wall, and (I'll paraphrase), somebody else is going to pay for it!" In his inauguration speech, Donald Trump said repeatedly "America First!," which really means "Us First!," and obviously implies that someone else is not us, and has to be second. Racial divisions in the last couple of years have been marked by the

two contrasting slogans “Black Lives Matter” and “All Lives Matter.” Is it ironic that those claiming that “All Lives Matter” would not likely be caught dead holding a sign that read “Stronger Together”?

The problem of division is not a new problem. It has to do with the question of the “other.” That is, what do we make of the person who is not like me, or the group that is not part of our group? It is also not the simple problem that slogans like “Stronger Together” or “Our Group First” would lead us to believe.

This problem of group identity and group difference, of how we relate to the “other,” is a key theme in two of today’s lectionary readings: the Old Testament passage from Isaiah as well as the epistle reading from 1 Corinthians. Both passages deal with a discrepancy between the worship practice of the covenant community – either Israel or the church – and its actions; both have to do with the problem of the “other.” How do we as Israel or we as a church relate to those who are not members of our community, and how does or should this affect our worship?

The Old Testament passage begins with a problem: God’s people are seeking the LORD; they worship God; they do all the right religious things, yet God does not bless them. The people are suffering from despair because God has appeared to abandon them. Why? The prophet speaks on God’s behalf: “They ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. ‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’” (v. 3).

The prophet provides two reasons why God is not honoring Israel’s worship, and both have to do with Israel’s relationship with “the other.” First, Israel’s worship is marked by internal division: they quarrel and they fight with one another: “Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist.” (v. 4). Second, they neglect

the other. Proper worship includes sharing one's bread with the hungry, providing shelter for the homeless, and food for the hungry: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"

The meaningful context for the passage is likely Isaiah 61: 1-2, where the prophet describes his mission: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn."

Israel's responsibility to the homeless poor and the hungry is directly related to the prophet's message as a whole. The message of Isaiah 40-66 is about God's deliverance of Israel from captivity in Babylon. Israel has been in captivity, and has suffered unjustly. God's righteous Servant has borne suffering and affliction, and so has Israel, but God has kept his promises and has delivered Israel from captivity. However, Israel's response is inconsistent with her current reality. Worship of the God who delivers Israel from suffering and captivity that does not include a corresponding mercy to those who suffer from homelessness and hunger is inconsistent with God's graciousness to Israel. Israel's identity is that of liberated outcasts – slaves delivered from captivity; yet in their worship, the nation has not been merciful and provided liberation to the outcasts in their midst.

The issue of division, difference, and otherness appears again in 1 Corinthians, but here the New Testament goes a bit further than the Old Testament because of something that has happened since Isaiah was written: the incarnation of God in

Jesus Christ. The main theme of the passage from 1 Cor. 12 is that of the unity of the church: The church is one because there is one Spirit; the church is one because it is the body of Christ, and Christ has only one body: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit."

1 Cor. 12 needs to be read in light of 1 Cor. 1:10-17. Paul begins this first letter to the Corinthians by recounting divisions in the church; some at Corinth say that they are disciples of Paul, some that they are disciples of Apollos, and some that they are disciples of Jesus. This concern about division is a major theme throughout 1 Corinthians: divisions between rich and poor at the celebration of the Lord's Supper; worship practices concerned with gender distinctions between men and women having to do with either head coverings or hair styles. And now, in 1 Corinthians 12, there are divisions in worship caused by status distinctions based on spiritual gifts. Speaking in tongues has become a "status" indicator in the church's worship. The ultimate irony, of course, is that the Holy Spirit, who is supposed to be the source of the church's unity, is being used to justify division within the church. Some things never change.

The problem is again, that of how we relate to the other – here, not neglect of the other, but opposition to the other found in factionalism. Different groups within the church are jockeying for position over against each other based on whether or not they think God is using them in the context of worship. Note again, that as in the Isaiah passage, God's people are engaging in worship activity which is itself in contradiction to their identity as God's people, and the problem has to do with how they treat one another.

How does Paul address the issue of how we respond to the other? First, it is important to recognize that identity is

crucial: Paul begins by making clear that the church has no identity in itself; our identity as church exists only in relationship to Jesus Christ who is the Lord of the church. "You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus is accursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit." Paul's solution to division is not to advocate what the liberal church calls "inclusivism." Paul does not say "We're stronger together!" or even "All lives matter!" For Paul, the church has come out of the surrounding culture, and is distinct from the culture. The culture can provide no help in terms of establishing community because it has no stable basis for identity: "You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led." The culture leads one way one moment, and another the next. As the gospel passage makes clear, the church is to be the salt which seasons the surrounding culture; the church is to be the light of the world. If salt has lost its flavor, how can it be salt? If the church is not distinct from the culture, how can it be the light which encourages the culture to praise the Father for our good deeds? If the church simply conforms to the surrounding culture, it is neither salt nor light.

Much of what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians is against assimilation to the surrounding pagan culture, concerning such issues as sexuality, Christians engaging in lawsuits against one another, even concerning what kind of food they should eat, and whether they should eat with pagans. However, factionalism is as much of a problem as assimilation because factionalism also concerns a lack of proper identity – centering one's identity in the wrong thing, one one's own interests and pursuits rather than in Jesus Christ.

Paul's solution to the problem of Christian factionalism is not simply to appeal to Jesus, but to appeal to Jesus in his

moment of greatest humiliation; the solution to factionalism runs through the path of the cross. Paul famously writes in 1 Corinthians 1: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. . . . God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

Christian identity is thus found in the cross, not in our denominational distinctives, our theological heroes, not even in the superiority of our exegesis, or the size of our dogmatic tomes. The cross is the solution to our problems with factionalism, which are ultimately rooted in distrust of the "other" and pride, because the cross makes clear that God is not proud. On the cross, the God who created the world himself became the other; God took upon himself our distrust and suspicion of those who are not like us. In his death on the cross, the incarnate God came to his creation as one like ourselves, a fellow human being, "flesh of our flesh," and human beings dealt with him as a stranger. By crucifying God incarnate, to use the words of Isaiah, we "hid from our own flesh," but also from our Creator.

If the cross is God's solution to the problem of human division based on alienation from the other, the church is the community that God has created to provide an alternative to communities that base their identity in cultural differences. The church does not find its identity in common ethnic or national loyalties in distinction from other ethnic groups or countries. The church does not even find its identity in intellectual brilliance. The church is not a philosophy. Rather, the church finds its identity in something (or rather someone) far more concrete and specific: a person, who has a physical body. The church is the body of the crucified and

risen Jesus Christ. As in the original creation story, Eve was taken from the side of Adam – flesh of his flesh – so the church was taken from the crucified Jesus Christ’s bleeding side to become both his body and his bride. As the Holy Spirit brooded over the waters in creation and gave life to humanity by breathing life into that first human being God created, so the Holy Spirit is now the love who has been sent by the risen Jesus Christ, and has been breathed into the church to join the church to Jesus Christ’s risen humanity so that we might become the body of Christ and share in the eternal love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

As God in Isaiah expected Israel to pattern its worship on the character of the God who had redeemed the people from bondage, so the church must pattern its life on that of the crucified Lord Jesus Christ. The church is not simply an identity group whose identity is determined by its difference from other social or cultural groups. Rather, the church is a “fellowship,” a *koinonia*. Because we have been joined to Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection, our baptism in Christ creates one fellowship through the one Holy Spirit; the Church is one body as we receive one loaf and one cup in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. As God in Christ has given himself to us, so we therefore became able to give ourselves to one another. As Jesus Christ welcomed us when we were strangers, so we can welcome the stranger not as a stranger, but as another for whom Christ has died.

At the same time, the unity of the church does not mean simple conformity, but genuine unity in genuine difference. God values difference and diversity. As Paul writes, there is one body and one Spirit, but there are many members of that one body. All the members of the church are empowered by the one and the same Holy Spirit, but the Spirit apportions his gifts to each one individually as he wills (v. 11). If I could add an additional beatitude to the sermon on the mount, it would read something like this: “Blessed are the odd, because we’re

not all the same and God does not intend for us to be all the same.”

That is, in short, God’s solution to the problem of the divisions that seem so endemic to our culture right now, but, as Isaiah and 1 Corinthians make clear, are nothing new. In the incarnation, God in Jesus Christ has taken on the burdens of human estrangement and division on the cross. The church is God’s community of reconciliation, but even the early church had to struggle with factions, so the solution is an ongoing one. Things won’t get better over-night.

That’s perhaps all to the good, but where do we begin? How does this theology of the church as the body of Christ address the problems of the divided culture in which we live, especially when that culture seems less and less able to hear the message of God’s solution to estrangement and division? I confess that I find myself tempted to despair of finding any pragmatic solutions to the culture’s current divisions. But the following are just some suggestions.

First, we Christians should begin where we are. If the church is God’s solution to the problem of division, then we need to begin with the church. The church is supposed to be that alternative community that lives a life of reconciliation. We begin by being reconciled to our fellow Christians. Those closest to us – to our families, to our roommates, to those we work with.

Second, in a culture that is rapidly losing touch with its Christian heritage, if the church is to be a community of reconciliation, it must be faithful to its cruciform identity. The culture would like us a lot more if the church were more willing to compromise on its creedal commitments to the Triune God, the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, the person and work of Jesus Christ. But what good news do we have to offer the culture if we cannot tell them that Jesus Christ died for their sins – even if they don’t want to hear it? If

salt has lost its flavor, what good is it?

Third, cultural and partisan divisions in the church need to be distinguished from genuine theological differences. There really is such a thing as heresy, and orthodox historic Christianity has always claimed that heresy is genuine grounds for division. Having said that, while separation from heresy is not the same as schism, not all church divisions concern heresy. Church divisions that really reflect different socio-economic status or race, different national or geographical histories, or even indifferent theological disagreements, are scandalous.

Fourth, the church's theology and worship needs to be ecumenical. To be Evangelical means to be Catholic, and to be Catholic means to be Evangelical. Confessionally orthodox Christians from different confessional traditions need one another, and we need to learn from one another – not only from different expressions of Christian faith (that is, other denominations), but also from Christians of other cultures. Affluent Western Christians, in particular, need to listen to the voices of Christians from the global South and from Asia.

Speaking of worship, worship is not enough. I enthusiastically endorse Jamie Smith's books, and I agree about the significance of liturgical worship as a crucial element in spiritual formation. However, as the readings from both Isaiah and 1 Corinthians make clear, we can sing the right hymns, share a common lectionary, follow the proper rubrics, and still miss the point. Worship that does not welcome the "other" is bad worship. Worship that does not care for the poor is bad worship. Worship that does not include those who are unlike us is bad worship.

So even as the church retains its identity, the church needs to embrace genuine diversity and difference. We should welcome the different, the misfits, even those who are somewhat peculiar. In North America, the Evangelical church tends to

resemble a social club for middle-class comfortable white America. Do we welcome poor people in our churches? Where are the unemployed and the less well-off? Where are the non-conformists, the creative artists, the oddballs?

Finally, when it comes to those outside the church's walls, the church's identity should be that of mission, not isolation. If the temptation of the liberal church is toward cultural accommodation, the temptation of the orthodox church seems more and more toward that of circling the wagons. While I am sympathetic to what has come to be called the Benedict option, I think what we really need is a Dominican option. The church's message to the culture really is good news. We live in a culture full of estranged people, people who do not trust one another, and are not sure whether anyone can be trusted. If the church really were to begin to live out the life of hospitality and reconciliation that is at the heart of the gospel, to really welcome the stranger, we might be surprised to discover that the stranger would like to be welcomed.