

A funny thing happens to clergy in the early years of professional ministry. I have a hunch that all ministers fall victim to it at some point in their careers, and I think Paul is alluding to it in this text today. Newly minted and practice for a couple of years, we begin to believe in the power of our own story, believing our best theologies, trusting our best judgment. We're susceptible to the very real human insecurity of inadequacy, bolstered by the word of adoration people offer, typically at the end of the service when they shake the minister's hand. "Wonderful sermon." "I really liked the part that spoke directly to my story." "Your music was wonderful." We feed on this stuff. We eat it up.

And equally dangerous is the power clergy give to someone who does the opposite and pulls away. They don't like the way the service goes; they don't like a particular perspective about social justice or politics; they don't like what the minister says, wears, does, and they leave. And most ministers fall into that trap of taking it personally; we end up thinking "if only I'd said or done the right thing, introduced the right program, visited their home just one more time."

The scary part is that people develop allegiances to those very human tendencies. There are some people in this congregation who are loving my leadership; so they're hanging around. Some people way preferred Sharon's leadership or Mollie's, or John and Eleanor's for that matter, and they disappeared when the new one came along.

I'm not the first minister who still gets a little fussed about what the people say. We wonder if we're meeting people's needs. We wonder if they like how things are going. When I first arrived, I asked more than one of you to keep your ears on the conversations happening in the parking lot. I don't like parking lot conversations but they are informative. Even Jesus got caught up in wondering what the folks were talking. There is the story in the gospel of Mark as Jesus and the disciples are walking to their next preaching stop, Jesus turns to Peter and asks "what are the people saying. Who do they think I am?"

This is what Paul's got his eye on in the part of his letter that Doug read this morning, only he's not so concerned about the insecurities of the leaders. He's really noticing how the people are responding within the community. He's taking aim at the fact that people in the church in Corinth are lining up behind one leader or another. Chloe, the one who may have sent the inquiring letter in the first place, has described what has

been happening. She has not been describing petty squabbles here. These are deep factions, deep schisms along leadership lines. And Paul takes aim.

Here's what it says in The Inclusive Bible:

"I beg you, sisters and brothers, in the name of our Saviour Jesus Christ, to agree in your message. Let there be no factions; rather, be united in mind and judgment. I have been informed by certain members of Chloe's household that you are quarreling among yourselves. One of you is saying 'I belong to Paul,' another 'I belong to Apollos,' still another, 'I belong to Cephas (who is Peter),' still another 'I belong to Christ.' What – has Christ been divided into parts? Was it Peter who was crucified for you? Was it in Paul's name that you were baptized? Frankly, I'm thankful I didn't baptize any of you, except Crispus and Gaius."

Paul hits the nail on the head. The church in Corinth, with all its gifts, with all its blessings is deeply divided over lines of leadership, with people pledging allegiance to the doctrine and dogma espoused by particular leaders. They are carving themselves up, throwing emotional stones at one another in the very real human desire to tear down. It's not a pretty scene. He doesn't say the leaders are contributing to the problem, but based on my experience, it's pretty easy to imagine that happening.

In the first part of this letter, the part we heard last week, Paul claims his own authority – an apostle sent by the living Christ as he experienced the spirit of the living Christ. Remember the road Damascus? In the first part of the letter he also reminds the Corinthians that they are gifted beyond measure. Now here, having heard Chloe's complaint about the factions forming under the varieties of teaching, Paul reminds them that they are the body of Christ, called to preach Christ crucified and risen.

As they make each other the object of their attention, in lines of conflict, it becomes easy to vilify the other. It's easy to get angry with the opponent, to objectify them and make them the target of each other's displeasure. It often happens. When we disagree with someone else's line of thinking or action, it's easy to put them in the centre and hurl stones. It happened then. It happens now...even in church. Go figure. That's what's going on in this beloved church that Paul founded.

And in the midst of those factions he makes the bold assertion: "The point is, Christ didn't send me to baptize but to preach the Gospel, not with human rhetoric, but the cross. Preaching with rhetoric renders the gospel of the cross void of meaning. For the message of the cross is complete absurdity to those who are headed for ruin, but to those who are experiencing salvation, it is the power of God." This is just a taste of what Paul is to offer in later chapters – a construct consistent with the way he writes.

Into the silliness of factions, splits and separations over leadership, Paul places the cross and reminds the Corinthians, the cross is the reason we're here. The gospel of the cross, the message of the cross, the grace of the cross is the point of our gathering.

So think of it. We place the person we love to dislike...the one we complain about, the one who brings us no end of sleepless nights. We make up our allegiances and we end up at odds with one another. What happens?

What happens then when we put the gospel of Christ at the centre of our focus? What happens when the gospel as we understand it, the mission to which we have all been called, the future for which we all hope? What happens instead, if we put that at the centre of our focus?

Let's try this experiment. I'll sit right here in the midst of you. I know full well some of you love my leadership. You tell me all the time. I know full well that some of you could take me or leave. I also know there are some of you who are simply waiting for me to move on. And what happens? When I become the focus of your attention – like any other of the leaders mentioned in Paul's letter – Cephas, Apollos, Paul – you begin to take sides.

Now what happens when I put Christ crucified at the centre of our gathering? I'll put this cross on the stool, symbolizing our mission. We are not putting human rhetoric at the centre of our gathering, we are putting Christ crucified and risen. And like we noticed at Waves yesterday, this community is being changed by this gospel. We who are experiencing salvation – lived out in how we are called to serve this community. We put our mission. We put our values. We put Jessica's resolution. We put our call to serve. When I put all of this at the heart of the community what happens?

What's happening right now inside your bodies? Anyone want to offer a thought? Don't we become fellow travellers on the road – here to help each other bear the load?

Paul says, stop making your decisions and carving yourselves up based on the teachings of one particular leader or another. He calls the Corinthians to be united in mind and judgment. The gospel of the cross is not human rhetoric. The gospel of the cross is the power of God. Amen.