

"An Undivided Ministry"

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

February 16,2014

6th Sunday After the Epiphany

We now live in a society that emphasizes (some would say “obsesses over”) personal choice. We not only believe that it is possible to have exactly what we want, but we believe that we are entitled to exactly what we want. A slogan from a certain fast food chain says it all: “Have it your way!”

For fast food restaurants, this means you should be entitled to have the kind of food you want the way you want it, whether it’s healthy or not. But this attitude goes beyond food. I remember going to my doctor in Nebraska one time when I was sick and he asked me, “What tests do you want me to run on you?” I was stunned by the question. I was thinking, “You’re the doctor. I don’t know enough about medicine. You’re supposed to choose those things.”

We have the same choice in medical prescriptions now, too. Do you remember when doctors alone would choose what medicines you should get? Now we see all sorts of commercials which advertise prescription medicines and encourage you to choose that medicine and “ask your doctor to see if Medicine X is right for you.”

Within the last generation, have we become experts in nutrition, medical procedures, and medications? With the technology and information explosion that has occurred, we do know more than previous generations. Or, is it just that we want to be in control of things by exercising our personal choice?

This kind of thinking can easily spread to the Church, perhaps without us realizing it because that way of thinking has become so engrained in us. It certainly has spread into the Corinthian congregation which Paul was addressing in our epistle reading for today.

The Christians in Corinth were experiencing jealousy and strife over a conflict of choices. Paul writes, “For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in

a human way? For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not being merely human?" In short, the people were arguing over their choice of pastor. Some liked Paul, the founding pastor of the church. Others liked Apollos, the present pastor. Now, there's nothing wrong with having affection for a particular pastor. But these people were not just "liking" one or the other. They were choosing one over the other. This was causing strife in the congregation and hindering their mission.

The same thing happens today in many churches. Some people favor the previous pastor and will go to him for counsel or advice. Some people favor the present pastor and follow him. Some might favor an entirely new pastor to come and to take over from the present pastor. Again, there's nothing wrong having affection for one particular pastor or honoring a previous pastor. But, if such preferences cause strife or discord, then they are a problem.

Lest you think this is a problem just for laypeople, it is also a temptation for pastors as well. Only, instead of favoring one person over another, pastors can be tempted to favor one congregation over another. My sons tell me of classmates at the seminary who tell the placement board just exactly what kind of congregation they would be willing to serve and what location they would like to be at. They act as if they should be able to personally choose the congregation for which they would be pastor. Pastors experienced in the ministry, when facing frustrating times, may begin thinking of serving another congregation which might be better for them. Some might even try to finagle a call to another congregation. Obviously, this can cause great strife and discord, too.

There seems to be an assumption among church members, sometimes spoken and sometimes below the surface, that if a church could get just the right pastor or, at least, a better pastor, their congregation could grow. There can also be an assumption by pastors that, if they could just get in the right congregation in the right location with the right resources, then they could grow the Kingdom of God in that place and have a large and thriving congregation.

Paul condemns this as acting according to the human way of thinking which states that the success of an enterprise depends on who is leading it or where it located. In addition to condemning this thinking for causing strife, Paul condemns it for being unbiblical.

He asks the questions, “What then is Apollos? What is Paul?” He doesn’t ask “Who” is Apollos or Paul? He knows who he is and who Apollos is so he’s not asking for identity. Rather he says, “WHAT is Apollos?” And “WHAT is Paul?” In other words, what difference, in the grand scheme of things do these pastors make? They are sinful human beings who have no power, in and of themselves, to bring success to the ministry.

There are no perfect pastors and there are no perfect congregations. What is Apollos? What is Paul? What are pastors? Paul answers his own question by saying, “Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.” Pastors are simply servants – sinful and flawed servants – who bring a message. What are congregations? Congregations are composed of people – sinful and flawed people – who believe in Christ because of that message.

What is the message? It is not a message of worldly success by worldly methods led by slick CEO’s for Fortune 500 companies. Earlier in this book, Paul refers to it as “the word of the cross.” (1 Cor. 1:17) The message of Jesus’ cross is a simple message which we all know, but sometimes forget. It comes in two parts.

First, the cross of Christ reveals the source and reason for all our problems: namely, sin. We are more than flawed. We, our world, and all of humankind are corrupted by sin and doomed to death and hell. The cross shows the wrath of a holy God who must fully punish sin and completely wipe it out. For, there on the cross, hell was experienced and death was inflicted.

Secondly, the cross of Christ, at the same time, shows God’s great love for humanity and mercy toward sinful and corrupt people like you and me. For the punishment of God’s wrath and the inflicting of hell were not done to those who had earned and deserved it. This cosmic death sentence was carried out on a completely innocent victim, the completely holy Son of God, Jesus Christ.

The message of the cross is this: your sin and my sin and the sin of the world has been taken from us and put on the Son of God. He is punished so that we might go free. He dies so that we might live. He rises from death and the grave so that we might do likewise and live under Him in His Kingdom forever.

Paul admits that this makes no sense whatsoever. Some people look for a powerful miracle from God. Some look for a plan that makes sense. But Paul writes earlier in this book,

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. 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.” (1 Cor. 1:21-24)

God’s way of delivering the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection seems equally foolish. While we search out charismatic leaders, the newest program or fad, or modern facilities, God simply sends men to proclaim the message and calls people to hear the message. Paul says, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Cor. 1:6)

The role of pastors is to plant the message and then to water it. The job of the pastors is not to attract attention or glory to himself, but to keep tending and watering the Word of God which was planted before him. I continue to follow in the footsteps of Pastors Drummond, Eckelman, Bersley, Hingst, and Kreidt, watering what they have planted and nurtured.

But it is God who brings the growth, not me or any of the other pastors. Through the working of His Word and His Sacraments, people are brought to faith and sustained in faith. Sometimes there will be growth in numbers. Sometimes there will be growth in faith. Sometimes there will be growth in service. Sometimes there will be growth in all three areas. But the growth will always occur because of God’s working through the proclamation of the Word of the cross and the action of Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and Holy Communion in birthing new Christians, forgiving their sins, and nourishing them in their faith.

So, where is our attention to be directed? It's certainly not to pastors who bring the message. Some were surprised after I arrived here that when you complimented me on having a good sermon, I would reply, "Thank the Lord for that!" This was not false modesty or a lack of appreciation for your kind words. I truly believe I am nothing in this whole process but a messenger.

Our attention is also not to be directed toward congregations, their members, or their resources. You are simply recipients of God's grace, the message of that grace, and the Sacraments which convey that grace. You've done nothing to deserve these great things or earn them.

As Paul writes, "So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." There you go! Our attention, our praise, our gratitude, and (dare I say it?) our personal choice is to be directed to God. He is the One who saved us. No pastor did that. He is the One who gives the growth. No congregational program or members' merit accomplished that. It is all from Him, by Him, and through Him.

Pastors will come and go. Congregations and their members will come and go. But the Word of the cross and its proclamation will always remain. The message planted by pastors in the past will continue to be watered and tended by pastors in the future. Congregations, whether replete with big buildings and much money or meeting in lowly structures in rural Montana, will continue to have people believing in that message and receiving forgiveness, joy, peace, hope, and everlasting life. And God will grant the growth! Amen.