

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
Called to Unity
1 Corinthians 1:10 – 17

The Holy Spirit was alive and active. The people were exhibiting gifts that they had never seen before. They had diversity in their religious backgrounds – Gentile, Jewish, *and* pagan. And they were a place where even the dregs of society were welcomed.¹ They were *dynamic*, and they were in a place of significant *influence*.

People *knew* about Corinth. They were a center of government. The Roman Governor was seated there. They were a trade center, and the world both came *to* them and came *from* them. Products, services, ideas, and religious beliefs were all traded in Corinth.

So much potential and yet, as Pastor Judy said last week, so *immature*. Like teenagers striving for self-differentiation, for independence, the Corinthian Church *balked* at authority. They were glad to be a church, but they did *not* appreciate Paul's oversight, corrections, and exhortations. They just wanted to do what *they* wanted to do. And so they did. (pause)

Paul was across the sea in Ephesus, but he did not forget his church plant in Corinth. He was their spiritual father, and he felt responsible for them. He visited when he could and wrote them letters. In verse 11, it says that Paul received word from Chloe's people that there were schisms in the church. What each group believed or held to be most important is unclear, but what *is* clear is that there were at least three schisms in Corinth – one that said they followed Paul, another that said

¹ Eerdmans, 1049.

they followed Apollos, and another that said they followed Peter. There may also have been a fourth group that said they followed Christ. (The Greek is unclear in verse 13.)

Paul is *not pleased* to hear that the church has divided. He is *not* flattered by having a fan club. He does *not* want to go back to Corinth to see cheerleaders with pom poms, cheering for Paul. His ego is *not* stroked. He is *saddened*, because he is not *anyone's* savior. *Paul* is no one's savior, *Apollos* is no one's savior, and *Peter* is no one's savior. *No one* can save but Christ *alone*, and Christ is not divided.

Paul is so distressed by their divisions, that he *begs* them to agree. He places himself in a subservient position, and invokes the name of the highest power. He invokes the name of the One who is their master, the One who created them, and the One who died to save them, the Lord Jesus Christ. He begs them in the name of their Lord Jesus Christ, to agree with one another and not to be divided.

I appreciate the language Paul uses in verse 10 to describe the church, because it paints a picture. The word he uses to describe the division of the church is a garment that has been torn. When it's torn, it doesn't serve its purpose. Paul says that the church needs to be sewn back together into the same mind and the same purpose. (pause)

It is interesting that the unity of the Corinthian Church is of primary importance to Paul. He addresses the issue of their divisions before *any* of their other problems – before their sexual immorality, before their impropriety in worship, and before correcting their theology.

It's interesting that their unity is a primary concern to Paul, because as a culture, we have grown so accustomed to the opposite. We have grown so accustomed to division, that we are *surprised* when we are united. We have become so tribalized, that we do not want to be around others who think and believe differently from us, and unfortunately, there are studies to show it.

In 2018, Social Psychologist, Matt Motyl (Motul) presented political graphs of presidential elections in the United States from 1992 to 2016. His presentation consisted of three colors – red, white, and blue. White represented a competitive county – “a county where the winner of the presidential election for that...county won by less than 20...points.” Red represented “a county in which the Republican candidate...won by more than 20 points.” And blue represented “a county in which the Democratic candidate...won by more than 20 points.”² In 1992, there was a fair amount of white; counties were competitive. Yet, in every subsequent graph, the red and blue expanded, indicating increasing polarization year over year.

I recognize that merely mentioning the words “political” and “polarization” can get your blood to boil, but please stay with me here. The point is not politics, but that we are increasingly polarized. We see ourselves as increasingly different from one another, so we seek to be around those with whom we agree.

In 2016, the Christian research group, Barna, studied the American struggle to talk across divides. They polled 1,000 people from a variety of backgrounds, asking, “Which groups do you think it would be difficult for you to have a natural and normal conversation with? Mark all that apply.” In that list were Muslims,

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/darwins-subterranean-world/201808/the-polarization-america>

Mormons, Atheists, Evangelicals, and the LGBT Community. Out of all the groups who responded, *Evangelicals* said that they struggle, more than any other group, to have natural and normal conversations with those who are different from them. 28% even said that it would be very or somewhat difficult to have natural and normal conversations with other *Evangelicals!*³

Culturally, we are in a sad state. Many of us struggle to have conversations with people who are unlike us, and some of us even struggle to talk to people who are *like* us.

We are a part of a broken culture. One which has become increasingly fearful of the other and is concerned that the other is dangerous. One which feels the need to compete against all others to win, to survive, and others simply become means to *our* ends.

It may seem that all hope is gone, that we are too divided, and that there is no turning back. But the church offers the hope of something different. The church does *not* have a political ideation to evangelize to the world. The church does *not* have a social order to that needs to be espoused. The church is *not* about mental assent to an idea. The church is not about a particular leader, a preferred style of worship, or what makes us happy. The church is *not* about me and what I want, and the church is *not* about you and what you want.

The church offers hope, because the church is about *Jesus*. The church is about following the One who endured the foolishness of the cross so that we might

³ <https://www.barna.com/research/americans-struggle-to-talk-across-divides/>

have life! The church is about following the Person of Jesus. Jesus is our center, our core, our foundation, our rock.

When Jesus is our center, we can be united. When Jesus is our center, we don't have to be the same in order to love one another. When Jesus is our center, *we* are not. When Jesus is our center, our desires are set aside. When Jesus is our center, we listen for the voice of the Spirit guiding us. When Jesus is the center, we humbly submit to his desires for us and for the world. When Jesus is the center, the church *shines*, and the world sees.

Placing Jesus at the center is a practice of *great humility*. It is our natural inclination to be independent, to draw attention to ourselves, to serve ourselves, to divide. We know this is true, because this was the sin at the very beginning, in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve did not want to depend on the voice of God; they wanted to be independent. This is our sin, too. We do not want to be dependent on the voice of God; we want to be in charge; we *want* to divide. (pause)

I remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday. I was working in youth ministry, and thought I had conceived of a clever idea to boost our youth attendance. I presented my idea to someone I thought of as a supporter, and my idea was immediately shot down. I remember having a visceral reaction to this denial. I could feel it in my body that this person was out to get me, and I wanted to win. I wanted to be right. I took my anger to the pastor, who determined *not* to support my idea because of the lack of support I had gained in that previous conversation. I felt alone and unsupported, and carried the conviction that I was right and that I had been wronged. I determined that I no longer liked this person and was ready to write

them off. I remember a distinct thought coming to mind. *In the end, will accomplishing this goal really matter? It is not the particular method that matters, but that Jesus is shared.* Deep down, I knew that that was the voice of God, but I decided to push it aside. I *chose* to divide, to harden my heart, to hate.

What arrogance! To decide that my way was the only right way, and that anyone who chose to defy my idea would receive hatred. Clearly, *I* was the center, and Jesus was not. That is really sad, and I am sorry to say that that story is true.

(pause)

We have so much to learn, so much room to grow in our love for one another. So much room to grow in our understanding of what it means to keep Jesus as the center.

Primarily, this means humility. You do not have all of the answers, and neither do I. We are not always right. Our vision gets clouded and we need help seeing clearly. And as Christians, this means that not one of us alone carries the voice of God, and not one of us alone knows the mind of the Spirit. We can be wrong, and we *need* the voices of the Christian community to speak truth, to inform the decisions that we make. We do the best that we can to hear the voice of God, but we can get in the way; we can get it wrong. We *need* to humbly set ourselves and our desires aside, so that Jesus can be the center.

When Jesus is the center, we can be unified. When Jesus is the center, we can be sewn together like a once-torn garment, now stitched together with a common purpose and love for one another.

We are called to unity. Like the Corinthian Church, this is our primary responsibility, our primary calling as the family of God. To love the Lord our God with all of our being, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt 22:37). To be unified in the bonds of love, unified by Jesus Christ.

May this be our song.

“Jesus, be the centre

Be our source, be our light

Jesus...

Jesus, be our vision

Be our path, be our guide

Jesus

(chorus) Be the fire in our hearts

Be the wind in these sails

Be the reason that we live

Jesus, Jesus”⁴

⁴ <https://www.letssingit.com/vineyard-lyrics-be-the-centre-8m4hdq9>