

“Following Jesus”  
1 Corinthians 1:1-9 & Matthew 4:12-25  
January 26, 2020

Many people say that a recipe for disaster is to take people with different views, ideas, attitudes, backgrounds, and agendas, and to put them all together in one place. A case in point could be our United States House of Representatives and Senate. It seems rare when these two groups ever accomplish anything together, except the ability to disagree. The same promises that were made 50 years ago concerning taxes and spending are still being made today, because of the disagreements among these individuals. Seeing a sense of unity among these two groups is almost unheard of, except when maybe disaster strikes such as a hurricane, an earthquake, or an event like 9/11.

The Church of Corinth, in our second lesson for today, was also made up of a group of people who had differing views, attitudes, and agendas. The congregation was plagued by divisions, jealousy, and arguing. In a community that had a background of worshipping many false gods and a church filled with people who didn't care about right and wrong, were selfish, and were not following the ways of Jesus, society could easily look at a church like this and say, “See, Jesus does not change a thing. These Christians are acting just like people outside of the church. Why follow Jesus?” And when our world looks at the church of today, they will often say the same thing: “Christians don't seem to behave any differently from non-Christians. So why should we follow Jesus?”

As a result, the Church – the body of Christ – and Christianity can easily take a back seat to many other religions that promote good works and other ways to get to heaven, rather than Jesus being the only way, truth, and life. So Paul's message in our second lesson is not only addressed to the church of Corinth, it is also addressed to us.

Now instead of immediately criticizing the Corinthian people for their false practices and disagreements, Paul begins his letter by reminding them that despite their differences and sinful ways, they were called by God to be His own holy people. But they sure were not acting “holy;” and the same could be said of us, as well. We often behave just like people outside of the church, outside of the Christian faith. We get frustrated with one another, we disrespect each other, and we hurt people – even people we love. So Paul reminds these people, and all of us, that our holiness does not come from ourselves or our own efforts, it begins with Jesus. And this is where our unity begins. No matter what differences we may have in this place, we have all been made holy through Jesus alone, through His death and resurrection. So we can celebrate and join together as the body of Christ simply on this one area of unity, regardless of our backgrounds, age, attitudes, or personal agenda.

The next thing Paul does is to show us what else we have in common. He says in verse 3, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This grace and peace Paul refers to are not just words that convey a feeling, they are actual gifts from God. God's grace is upon all of us, in that He sent His only Son, Jesus, into our lives so that He could take away our debt of sin forever. His grace is that God is willing to have patience with His people, even when they convey to the world that they are no different than the people of the world. And His peace is given to us, despite our inadequacies, and all the things that keep churches from serving one another in the name of Christ Jesus. Peace is given in that in Christ, all things are possible. In Christ, churches like that of Corinth and Holy Cross in Clayton can become unified and can make a difference in their community, they can witness to others, and they can grow when Jesus and His gifts of grace and peace, are at the forefront of our ministry. Whatever attitudes, history, and agendas we have, they will be swallowed up when these gifts are seen and applied in the life of the church.

When God's work is done, when we gather together in the unity of Christ to serve Him by serving our neighbor through God's Word and His gifts of grace and peace, we are then the true church that Christ has called us to be. Paul reminds the Corinthians and all of us that there is nothing lacking in the Church as God is the one who equips His people to serve. Age does not prevent us from serving Him, education does not limit us, and our backgrounds do not limit this call we have from God to serve Him and our neighbors as the church. This is very important to remember, because in our Gospel lesson for today Jesus calls some ordinary fishermen to do the work of building God's kingdom here on earth. These fishermen were not well educated. They were not a group of experts on how to reach people with the Gospel of Jesus. They didn't have all the answers about faith, what it meant to follow Jesus, or how to build the Church. In fact, it didn't seem like they had any real

gifts that Jesus could use to build His Church. In the eyes of the world, they were some of the least likely people who ever would have been called for such a task. But Jesus often took people whom the world labeled as unimportant or unworthy – fishermen, the handicapped, the poor, and notorious sinners – and He used them and equipped them with gifts to do the work of sharing His love with others.

As a result, people who before never felt wanted, found a place where they were needed by Jesus. People who doubted the world even knew they existed were suddenly valued as followers of Jesus. Many times, just like these fishermen, we don't need to learn new skills or receive extensive training in order to do the work that God calls us to do as a church. In calling these fishermen to follow Him Jesus basically said to them, "You fishermen have been casting your nets into the sea for quite a while, now I want you to follow me as I will use you to fish for people." And they did. They were fishermen before and they were fishermen afterwards, but with Jesus their focus and priorities changed.

Every time Jesus says, "Follow me," it affects people, it changes them, and it changes us. What I mean by this is that while we know God loves everyone, that doesn't mean we want to be with everyone. For example, we don't mind Jesus trying to help the drug addict rebuild his life, but that doesn't mean we want to be sitting next to him at church. We're happy that Jesus heals the sick and comforts the poor, but that doesn't mean we want the house in our neighborhood that's "for sale" to be converted into public housing for the poor or a shelter for the homeless. It is exciting that God calls and equips us with His gifts to serve others, but that excitement can be reduced or restrained by the presence of people who we have not only shunned, but also tried our best not to be like in any way.

In calling all people to be part of the Church – Republicans, Democrats, Independents, the poor, the crooked, the failures, even people living inappropriate lives, – and to serve others together as part of the body of Christ, can be difficult for some people. After all, life in the church would be a lot more comfortable if it were just people like us; but Jesus cannot stop saying, "Follow Me" to people. And not only can He not stop, but He makes this invitation in such an indiscriminating way that almost anyone might show up.

At a time when churches are loaded with marketing techniques that are geared to attract certain people, Jesus is out knocking on every door, in every neighborhood, in every section of town, calling people who we have forgotten about, and welcoming people we have too often overlooked or ignored; and we are affected every time.

We are affected because the call of God through Jesus is a call away from the divided, fragmented world we experience every day, and a call into the one family of God where everyone is welcome, everyone has a place, and everyone is made holy. It is a call to share a way of life together that the world has said is not reasonable or desirable.

The Church is not the place we pursue our own interests. It's the place where Jesus pursues His Father's will – to save us and all sinners. It's the place where Christ comes to us, to equip us with His gifts, and to serve us. And so "to the church of God that is in Clayton, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."