

Get It Together, and Grow Up!

[Text -1 Corinthians 3:1-9]

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As we all know, things can get pretty intense and contentious when it comes to political parties. This isn't just an American phenomenon; in fact, compared to some other countries, we're actually pretty tame. It's not uncommon for fistfights to break out during Mexican legislative sessions. Some of you may remember seeing the 2011 video of Italian politicians literally slugging it out, as they argued about their involvement in that other boisterous political organization - the European Union. For my money, though, no one can top the Republic of China [formerly known as Taiwan] for outstanding achievement in legislative rivalry and violence. There's a video gone viral, of one of their politicians gone wild, *literally* trying to push a piece of legislation down an opponent's throat! They've even been awarded the mock *Ig Nobel Peace Prize*, for "demonstrating that politicians can gain more notoriety by punching, kicking and gouging each other, than by waging war against other nations."

Unfortunately, politicians aren't the only ones to master the art-less practice of attacking, belittling, and trying to crush those who disagree with them. Sad to say, some of the most intense and turbulent conflicts in history have come as the result of religious disagreements. Some of those have been between people of differing religious faiths; yet many have occurred between people of the same faith tradition, the same denomination, and even within the same congregations!

In this morning's New Testament reading, we hear about one such disruptive struggle taking place within the Christian community in Corinth, Greece. This is a church that was started by the apostle Paul, perhaps one of the most influential evangelists in Church history. Yet even Saint Paul had his problems; and one of those problems was the church at Corinth. Almost half of Paul's words in the New Testament are addressed to the Corinthians. And though his correspondence with them is grouped into two letters - First and Second Corinthians -

most Biblical scholars agree that they're made up of at least four separate letters. In each of those letters, Paul is addressing some new problem, or point of contention, that has arisen within that congregation. For some strange reason, there seems to be this reoccurring spirit of quarreling, jealousy, and divisiveness within that church; and since Paul can't always be there personally to address the problem, he does so through his letters.

Now normally, I don't choose Paul's letters from our weekly Lectionary to use as our New Testament reading. I generally prefer a reading from the Gospels - words of Jesus and words about Jesus - which I find more understandable and inspirational than some of Paul's writings. [Also, I was taught that it's not polite to read other people's mail!] But today I make an exception; because by peeking into Paul's correspondence to the Corinthians, you and I can learn a couple of important lessons about what it means to be the Church - the Living, Loving Body of Christ.

The first thing we learn from this morning's excerpt from Paul's letter, is that jealousy and divisiveness are often signs of a basic *immaturity*. He even goes so far as to address those Corinthians, not as "spiritual people", but as "*infants* in Christ." *Spiritual* people - people who are mature in their faith and lives - realize that quarreling and bickering usually doesn't get us very far. Whether we're trying to express a religious view or make a political point, it's important to keep our conversation on a mature and respectful level, in order to keep the dialogue going. Also, truly mature people of faith realize that they don't have all the answers; therefore they're willing to listen, willing to grow, willing to raise the rhetoric to a higher plane, so that all involved might benefit from the discussion.

The second thing Paul reminds us, is that Faith - like Life - is not a competition. In a Christian context, *faith* means that we trust in the power of Divine love and grace to save and restore - not just us - but all of Creation. A truly faithful person recognizes that Divine Compassion and Grace is abundant and inclusive! Therefore, there's no need to create polarizing parties to compete for spiritual blessings that are somehow in short supply. A genuinely mature spiritual person takes great pleasure in seeing *others* grow and advance in their Faith.

For them, it's not about who gets the credit or the glory, because they know that the glory belongs to God. They also know that there's plenty of work to be done, to help make that Divine and Inclusive Realm a viable reality on earth; so they're genuinely grateful for *all* those who are willing to work beside them.

That's one of the great things about the ministry here at Brecksville United Church of Christ. So many of you are highly dedicated and personally involved in making sure that the ministry of this church is fulfilled. And so much of the work that's done here, is done quietly, behind the scenes - with the mature and gracious attitude that what we *do* is far more important than any recognition we might receive. Therefore, many of you faithfully and steadily see to it that the work gets done, and that the Church continues to grow in its mission and ministry of Christ-like love and service.

One final - and hopeful - point we pick up from Paul's letter, is that the party divisiveness that arises within a church, a community, or a country, will begin to dissolve once we realize that essentially we all really *are* on the same team! So if people truly want what's best for their church, their community, their country, or their *world*, they will learn to put aside - or work around - their differences, in order to promote the greater good. Personally, I say if there are going to be different parties in the Church, then let's make them real parties! Baptism parties, birthday parties, bowling parties - parties that celebrate life, and joy, and community! Work parties, cleaning parties, knitting parties - parties that are held to do things that are productive and positive, helpful and unifying.

One such wonderful party that Paul writes about to the Corinthian Church, is the celebration of Holy Communion. This is a party where *all* are invited to participate equally: rich and poor, young and old, male and female, gay and straight, Conservative and Liberal, and everyone in-between! Saint Paul declares that when we eat of the One Bread and share of the One Cup, all our differences are set aside, and the One, United Body of Christ truly celebrates its wholeness *and* its holiness. This morning, I hope that all of you will joyfully join in this party. I promise you, it'll be far more meaningful,

affirming, and uplifting than the Democratic, Republican, and Independent Parties combined!