



TOGETHER IN THE SHADOW

January 26, 2020, The Third Sunday after Epiphany

First Corinthians 1:10-18

Douglas T. King, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

You are sitting in an airport late at night, weary and waiting on a flight to take you home. There is yet another announcement of delay. You sigh heavily and in harmony with the person sitting next to you. You exchange that world-weary look of recognition between two strangers who find themselves in the same predicament. After a brief comment or two about the joys of air travel, you exchange names and the polite questions begin. “Where’s home?” “What do you do for a living?” “Where did you go to school?” “Are you married?” “Have any kids?” We ask these questions for a few reasons. It passes the time and allows for polite small talk. It lets us find common ground for possibly deeper conversation. And it creates the opportunity for some small taste of community on the journey.

It sounds like if you wandered into the church in Corinth and were meeting folks for the first time at coffee hour there was a single burning question to be asked. “Whose team are you on?” In other words, “Who are you with? Paul? Apollos? Cephas?” But none of this was to create the opportunity for conversation or to find common ground. It was about seeking identity, an “us versus them” identity. The disagreements and divisions in this church were numerous so we are not exactly sure what this disagreement was about. What we do know is folks clearly had decided to whom they belonged and to whom they did not.

Now I do not doubt for one minute that there were good and faithful people in every one of those groups. And that each and every side of the arguments had their own well-reasoned rationales for the stand they were taking. But it is worth noting that Paul does not even make reference to the issues or the validity of the debate. What he does do is point out one of the greatest human frailties that can sabotage community, mistaking the penultimate for the ultimate.



There are all sorts of ends for which we strive in the church. In fact, our Book of Order contains what are called the Great Ends of the Church, which in abbreviated form are, the proclamation of the gospel, the fellowship of the children of God, the maintenance of divine worship, the promotion of social righteousness, and the exhibition of the Kingdom. At Brick Church we talk about the four pillars, worship, education, mission, and fellowship. These are all worthy and essential for the church to pursue with exuberance and diligence.

But when the pursuit of these ends and the methods by which we do so become the ultimate and most important focus for us, we enter into dangerous territory. There are important debates about how we worship, but if we let these debates become the most important element in our life together we have lost our way.

There are important debates about how we engage in mission; how we teach our children; how we share in fellowship; even what we serve at coffee hour! It is good to have strong and spirited conversations about how we do all of these important things, although I am not so sure how much we should debate bagels. But all of these good conversations and debates in every church all need to come with essential context that is our primary identity.

Everything we do and all that we are stands in the shadow of the cross. I have to admit, just saying this line makes me feel all old-timey. After all, when we meet a visitor to Brick Church, the first thing we want to share with them are all the things we do. Let me tell you about our programs for children, and our mission work and our wonderful fellowship opportunities. We do not open with: "we are followers of the one who was crucified for us." And if I did visit a church and that was the first thing they did to describe themselves, I would likely get a little uneasy and start looking for the nearest exit.

But just as Paul warns the Corinthians of emptying the power of the cross, so we too face the same risk. In our well-meaning journey to enacting the implications of what Jesus life, death and resurrection mean, we can find ourselves traveling a comfortable distance from the cross. We can forget our ultimate purpose and



ultimately, who we are. Our ultimate purpose is to claim the truth we have been given. God has created us in God's image but we are significantly flawed and broken. In response to this brokenness God came into the world in Jesus Christ to bridge the vast divide between our imperfection and God's perfection. And in Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection, we are welcomed across the great divide into God's healing embrace. From this we are left with the incredibly unfashionable and unfathomable reality that Jesus dying on the cross is a gift to us.

It is so scandalous and preposterous I do not blame us one bit for seeking to get some distance from it. Of course we want the church to be about the good things we do and our ideas about how to do them. Why would we not place the focus upon ourselves, what we can do, and how best we can do it?

If our primary focus is on the cross, we are constantly reminded of how much we are in need of being rescued, primarily from ourselves and our own limitations. And no one wants to be reminded of their deficiencies. Who wants to belong to a community that does that all the time? It sounds like some sort of society for poor self-esteem. That is never going to sell, particularly here in Manhattan. I don't think our communications people are going to make it the tag line for our website any time soon.

And yet, that is what our focus needs to be for us to be faithful, to be the church, to be the community we are called to be. Of course this does not mean we stop doing all the other things we do. Yes, we still engage in the vast variety of activities that make this church a bustling and gloriously hyperactive home for us all. We worship together. We learn together. We serve together. We share fellowship together. And we will still passionately debate the best ways to do all of the things we do, yes, even the food at coffee hour. But we do not let all that we do and all of the debate about how we do what we do blind us to the reality that all of this happens under the shadow of the cross.

Paul is reminding us there is a great risk to losing sight of our place beneath the cross; a risk to ourselves and to our community. If we are not careful, what we are doing and how we do it become our sole focus and our world begins to revolve



around ourselves. And when someone disagrees with what we are doing and how we do it, they clearly cannot see the truth the way we see it. And if they cannot see the truth, then they are not one of us and we are no longer community. Paul is reminding us that all these lesser truths that risk dividing us should not cloud our vision of the greatest truth of our need for Jesus Christ, which both humbles us and unites us.

There are churches, like the church in Corinth, that have a penchant for division, for choosing up sides. Brick Church has been blessed to not be one of those churches. But this is an important word for us to hear nonetheless. We find ourselves living in a wider culture that is increasingly defining itself in opposition to some other. “Us versus them” language has become the dialect of the day. As the late historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. [liked to say](#), “we suffer today from too much ‘pluribus’ and not enough ‘unum,’” meaning that we focus on what differentiates us rather than what unites us.

I am grateful it is not my responsibility to solve the challenges of this great nation; I will leave that to much wiser minds. But I am also grateful we are a congregation with all sorts of political perspectives and persuasions, for we dearly need each other. And I do know we should fiercely protect what brings us together and allows us to live together in community. We are all in the same predicament in this life, not just sitting waiting for a delayed flight, but in all the challenges of making our way through this remarkably fascinating, complicated, imperfect mortal existence. And we urgently need community for the journey.

What brings us together may be a little embarrassing, even absurd to some, but if we are the church it is the ultimate truth we must claim. No matter who we are, no matter what we do, we all stand under the shadow of the cross. And that cross is a stark reminder, of both our humbling imperfection and the perfect love of the God who claims us, redeems us, sustains us and calls us to live together as one body.

So let us debate about bagels; about when and how to worship, about how to serve others in the community; about the flowers for Easter Sunday. But let us always



stand together in gratitude and humility before the cross, the symbol of God's most powerful love for us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.