

Do You Wear a Cross?
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Isaiah 9.1-4 (NRSV)

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness —
on them light has shined.
You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Introduction to the Morning Lesson

We should remember that when Isaiah wrote those words more than seven centuries before Christ, darkness was still everywhere around his people. The area about which he spoke — Naphtali and Zebulun, later called Galilee — had been annexed by the Assyrians in 733 BCE. In fact, the phrase, “the way to the sea,” was the name of an Assyrian province in that area. So these words were written during a time of utter chaos, confusion, and despair among God’s people. The light Isaiah promised was seen not in the circumstances around them but in the faith they had in God. When you know God loves you, you can see the light even if everything around you sits in darkness.

Centuries later in a totally different context, Paul tries to help a church he had founded in the city of Corinth, a church also in chaos and confusion. Perhaps numbering at most 75 Christians, they came together on Sundays in a home in Corinth to hear God’s Word and to sing God’s praise. They assembled together and yet they were not united. But on one particular Sunday when they were together in their divisiveness, they read out loud a letter from their founder, the Apostle Paul. He wrote to them about the light, the light that should be seen by their faith, a light that shines forth only from the cross of Jesus Christ. Let’s read it in 1 Corinthians 1.

1 Corinthians 1.10-18 (NRSV)

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I

belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Introduction

Archaeological studies of ancient Corinth indicate that the largest house there would have accommodated no more than 50 people. So maybe that many Christians gathered one Sunday, probably in the year 55 CE. This was a uniquely new kind of group. As recent followers of Jesus Christ, they were “thrown together” with people they normally didn’t associate with. Slaves sat in the room with masters, men sat with women, poor sat with rich, people who were not liked sat with the people who didn’t like them. That was good, but something was wrong in Corinth. They were united in Christ but all the divisions of the world were still with them.

I can imagine that those who were most loyal to Paul were a little smug that morning. After all, here was a letter now from their favored leader. Certainly he would set the others straight about who was right and who was wrong.

But Paul took himself right out of the leadership competition. He didn’t play the numbers game that all pastors love to play: *I have this many members; I baptized this many; my church staff and budget are thus and so*. No, Paul didn’t care about any of that. His only concern was proclaiming the Gospel so the cross of Christ not be emptied of its power. “Has Christ been divided?” Paul asked the Corinthians. “Was I crucified for you?” he wondered. “Or were you baptized in my name?”

The effect of such questions demonstrates the problem of factions. Were we baptized in the name of our factions? Did our factions hang on the Cross for us? No, of course not! Christ is not divided. Neither Paul nor any other leaders died for us nor are we baptized in their names. So in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul appealed to the Corinthians and through them to us that we be in agreement and that there be no divisions among us. That’s the light that has dawned upon us. Will we walk in this light?

Will We Walk in the Light?

As I worked on this sermon, I got out my commentaries on 1 Corinthians. Along with those I found this Bible study called “In the One Spirit” which is a phrase from the twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians.¹ I had not seen this booklet for a long time. It is a Bible study produced for the whole denomination in the fall of 1995. It was written because of an action of the General Assembly Council and I was the chair of the GAC at the time.

The General Assembly Council is somewhat like the Session of a local church. It leads the denomination on behalf of the General Assembly between what were at that time annual meetings.

¹ 1 Corinthians 12.13: “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

(The Assembly now meets every other year.) But seeing this booklet again reminded me of the contentious debate about it, whether or not we should approve the writing of a Bible study for the whole church.

I moderated the meeting when this was discussed and I couldn't really believe the debate. People were actually arguing to *not* do Bible study and when the vote was taken it passed by only three votes. Some of the Council's most conservative members and some of its most liberal members both opposed doing the study. They hardly ever agreed on anything but they all thought this Bible study was a bad idea.

Afterwards, I asked some of them why. Most said they were concerned a Bible study in 1 Corinthians would be used against them, that is, against a particular cause or a particular group or a particular idea that they supported. As one person said, "Bible study is never neutral."

I was dismayed then and twelve years later I'm still dismayed when I think about. I agree that Bible study is never neutral and the Bible can easily be used to beat up on others. But for me the heated debate and close vote illustrate precisely what Paul was concerned about. We divide ourselves into this group or that faction or this cause or that position and we miss the unity that belongs to those who are claimed by Jesus Christ. In other words, we're just like the world and we walk in darkness.

The world divides itself by race, by gender, by religion, by economic status, by political ideology, by geography, by this, that, and the other thing. We're in the heat of the political season now which means that good, loyal, patriotic Americans will verbally beat up one another to win votes so they can become president to unite us. They divide themselves and us in order to bring us together. It's crazy! But it's the way of the world.

We might think Christians would be different but our history isn't very good. On one of my trips to Europe I visited Prague where 100 years before Martin Luther a man named John Hus (1369-1415) tried to reform the church. Sometimes the Hussites controlled the city of Prague and sometimes the Catholics controlled it. So we stood in the city square looking up at a centuries-old town hall and our guide told us about defenestration. At the time I didn't know what that word meant. Defenestration is throwing someone out of a window. So when the Catholics controlled Prague they killed the Hussites but defenestrating them from the upper windows of the town hall. And when the Hussites controlled Prague they defenestrated the Catholics. Even Christians divide themselves to the point of killing. I suppose the GAC members who were divided over a Bible study would not kill each other. But the same divisive spirit — the spirit of the world — is within us.

Paul points to the only light there is. Like Isaiah's hope that the people will no longer walk in darkness, Paul's light isn't obvious except to the eyes of faith. For from the cross dawns the light of God, the only light that can illumine our way. We are all judged by the cross of Jesus Christ. It is the one thing to which Paul could appeal for unity because it judges us all. It judges the Corinthian factions. It judges the Catholics who defenestrated the Hussites and the Hussites who defenestrated the Catholics. It judges Republican presidential candidates and Democrat presidential candidates. It judges those who voted for a Bible study and those who voted against it. It judges you and it certainly judges me.

It judges us by turning the values of the world upside down. The cross says that God's way and the world's way are not the same and God's way is the way of a cross. The world says winning is the only way. The cross says defeat and suffering and death are the way to eternal life. It seems

foolishness to the world but only beneath the cross do we stand united.

Conclusion

The moderator of the General Assembly wears a cross as the symbol of his or her office. In a similar manner, the Chair of the General Assembly Council wears a cross. It is passed from one chairperson to the next. It's actually a gold-plated symbol of the denomination which as you know is in the shape of a cross. Former chairs of the GAC are given silver-plated versions of that cross.

It might be different now with the increased security at airports. But back in 1995 and 1996 when I wore this cross all the time, it did not set off the metal detectors before getting on an airplane. There was not enough metal in this cross to be detected.

That has often made me wonder. As someone who wears the cross of Jesus Christ, not as jewelry but in my heart, I wonder do I have enough of the cross in me to be detected? Does the light of the cross illumine my life enough to be detected by others. And what I ask of myself, I also ask of you. Do you wear a cross, my friend, the cross of Jesus Christ? Can it be detected?

Of course, we all fail. That's why we need to come together in the only unity that matters — unity under the mercy of the cross of Jesus Christ so that his light will shine through us.