

**Fool Squad
September 6, 2009**

**Marci Auld Glass Southminster Presbyterian
1 Cor 4:6-21**

YotB

I love the writings of the apostle Paul. I don't always like how Christians use his writings, but I can't control that. I will say that when you hear Paul used to defend strict legalism, or to keep God's grace from people, to keep people out, that his writings are being misused. Because Paul, again and again, seeks to build up the Body of Christ. And seeks to do so by including more and more people into the Body.

And, of course, Paul wasn't really writing for us. He didn't know we'd be studying his letters 2,000 years after they were written. He certainly had no idea he was writing Scripture. To Paul, Scripture was the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. Paul was writing letters to actual people. To congregations he either had started or was going to be visiting. He was writing to address specific issues in the lives of these churches.

Your Year of the Bible readings started you out with Paul's final letter—the Letter to the Romans. That letter was written to people he'd not yet met, and serves as an introduction of sorts to who Paul is and what Paul understands about how God is at work through Jesus Christ.

Yesterday, we began reading 1 Corinthians. And the Letter to the church in Corinth, is very different from Romans. It is an earlier letter. It is not, however, his first letter to this church, because in it, he refers to an earlier letter. (1 Cor 5:9—I wrote to you in my letter.)

Corinth was a Roman colony and an important port city on a trade route. Paul is writing to people in an urban setting, with many different religions and gods with which the people would have been familiar.

The "church" in Corinth during the time Paul was writing to them, would have met in homes, and not in separate church buildings, as we do today. He founded the church around 51 CE. And, after he left to visit another church, there was at least one other leader—Appollos.

And the people to whom Paul is writing, are, apparently, having trouble getting along. From earlier in the letter:

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

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divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. (1 Cor 1:10)

*All of the reasons for their divisions are unclear, but it seems as if some have decided that Apollos was a better leader than Paul. And so Paul seems to be writing them back to establish some authority. As you read the earlier chapters of this letter, Paul acknowledges that he's not as good of a public speaker as Apollos is, but he makes it clear that isn't the point. Both Apollos and Paul are working for something bigger than themselves. They aren't in this so that people will follow *them*. They are doing this so that people will follow *God*! He wants them to rise above their differences and be united as the body of Christ so that God's work can be done through them.*

Chapter 4 is a continuation of the argument begun earlier in the letter that Paul has unique authority with them and that they should not just listen to what he has to say, but they should model their lives on his example.

But not on his example of wisdom, strength, or public speaking. They are to follow him in his weakness, foolishness, and lack of public acclaim.

So, even though we are just reading chapter 4 today, know that you need the context of the entire letter to allow Paul to build his argument. And remember that while Paul may not have been a good public speaker, he was a brilliant writer. He was well versed in the styles of rhetoric used in his culture. He is great at building up his argument in a way that gets people to start patting themselves on the back and then he will pull the rug out from under them, exposing the fallacies of their reasoning.

As I read over these words again and again this week, I couldn't help but hear Paul writing these words to us today. "so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another."

I'll likely get in trouble for wading again into politics, but I just can't help it. Truly, seriously, I am not expecting that you should agree with me about any political beliefs. But I am appalled and dismayed that the political conversation has broken down to such a degree in our nation that we no longer even want to talk to each other.

From the news this week:

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--A person in favor of healthcare reform bit off a finger of a counter-protester this week at a healthcare rally.

--Some politicians are saying they won't even listen to President Obama's address to the nation this week because they don't agree with what he has to say, even before he says it.

--Parents are pulling their kids out of school rather than let them hear an address by the President of the United States.

On both sides of the political spectrum, we are reacting out of fear and anger, without really listening to what people are saying and seemingly with little regard for what is at stake.

Liz Emrich, in an editorial at Salon.com summed it up well, when writing about the kerfluffle over school children being addressed by the president:

"What we really teach our children when we tell them that they shouldn't hear the words of their President, because he isn't espousing the party line we personally agree with, is that our identity as Americans is somehow less important than our identity as partisans. It's one more nail in the coffin of our national identity, our collective pride in our political system. We should be teaching our children to respect our President, even when we disagree with him. And the first step to respecting someone is listening to what they have to say."

http://open.salon.com/blog/liz_emrich/2009/09/04/in_case_you_hadnt_noticed_hes_the_president

I don't know if she knows it, but Emrich is recapping Paul's argument in First Corinthians. Whether you identify with Apollos or you identify with Paul, you have a larger obligation as a follower of Christ to come together and work together to build up the Body of Christ.

"Who sees anything different in you?", Paul asks. Another way to translate that verse is "who makes you different from one another?" "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?"

I posted a link on Facebook yesterday to the editorial I mentioned. And the comments turned into an illustration of 1 Corinthians. People started flinging around words like "liberal" and "conservative" as if they were

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weapons. People weren't listening to each other's ideas and opinions. I posted the article to call us back into conversation, yet people just kept on ranting at each other.

How did we get here?

I'm not a Pollyanna, really. I know that there are real differences of opinion out there. But don't we still have things in common too?

And Paul wasn't telling the Corinthians to pretend that they agree about everything. Remember that unity in Christ is not the same as uniformity.

He's calling them to a higher purpose. And reminding them that the things that divide us—Paul, Apollos, Republicans, Democrats—are secondary issues.

"What do you have that you did not receive?" He asks them. "And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?"

Friends, what do we have that we did not receive?

This week, as two members of our congregation have passed from this life to the next, I've been very mindful of the gift of life, as well as the gift of life in Christ. And as I tried to minister to you through a difficult time, you ministered to me with your kind and supportive emails, prayers, and hugs. So I've also been very mindful of the gift of community this week.

Not a community where we always agree with everything the others say. But a community where we love each other despite what the others say. That is why Southminster is the community it is—because we all share the gift of new life in Christ, we are able to come together as community, overcoming our differences.

That's what Paul wants for Corinth. He wants them to see their very lives as gifts. Because when you do that, you respond in gratitude.

But to do that requires seeing things differently than the world sees. We'll see this again and again in Paul's letters.

The wisdom of this world will only make us fight with each other about who is right and who is wrong. The foolishness of God, however, will

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make us look at each other with different priorities, calling us into community, giving us the gift of true wisdom.

But imitating Paul is not easy.

Because he doesn't tell us to be successful and well spoken and appreciated by the world.

Listen again to how they are supposed to be imitators of Paul:

We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.

He also says, "the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power". Which is sort of odd, since he's always telling people to be weak, and not strong. But I think what he's doing is reminding them that the foolishness of the gospel is not about talk. It is about how it lives out in our lives.

What if we really were to be imitators of Paul, who is, of course, imitating Jesus?

What if, when we were slandered, we spoke kindly in response?

What if, when people reviled us, we blessed them?

Have you seen the bumper sticker, "Love your enemies—it messes with their heads"?

In some ways, that's what Paul is calling us to do.

Because it is hard to have an argument when only one person is screaming. It is hard to escalate a situation when only one person is rising to the bait. It is hard to think that the wisdom of this world is wise when you look around through God's eyes and see the pain it is causing us.

As we read through this letter, and the ones to come, pay attention to how Paul speaks of foolishness and wisdom. Notice how the unity of the

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body of Christ matters so much to him. Notice how the gift of faith that comes through Jesus Christ is supposed to transform how we live our lives.

And may we learn how to be fools for Christ.

Amen.