

Fools Together

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

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When I was growing up, I went to school about 45 minutes from my house. It was a long bus-ride every day, and we students invented all kinds of ways to entertain ourselves. When I was *very* young, I remember taking my pogo ball on the bus (and if you didn't grow up in the 80's, I'm sorry that you missed out on the pogo ball) and pretending it was a steering wheel driving the bus. Tons of fun. Later, we played games with one another. One friend and I played a *lot* of hangman. And we had plenty of time for *long* games, so we began the practice of posing questions through our hangman answers. For instance, instead of having the answer to the puzzle be, "orange," the answer would be, "What's your favorite color?" That takes a lot longer to discover in Hangman.

I distinctly remember one day on the bus doing a hangman game for my friend, with the question, "What religion are you?" Maybe that sounds funny knowing I grew up in the Bible belt, but what I was after was her denomination – I just didn't know how to ask that. When she had discovered the question, she looked at me like I was crazy and said, "I'm Christian. What are you?" Now I knew she was Baptist, so I thought this whole "Christian" thing was just her way of saying she was better than me. But later I realized how much the divisions in the church – seen most clearly through denominations – had taken root in my life, even when I was a child. Being divided from other Christians was normal.

The church is divided – in so many ways, over so many things – and has been since its inception, according to Paul's letters. The Corinthians were divided by wealth and poverty, education and power status in the community. The modern church still has those issues, and adds things like mode and timing of baptism, role of women, gays and lesbians in leadership, authority of Scripture, style of music, and things as mundane as sanctuary layout, paint colors.

So when we read this part of Paul's letter to the Corinthian church, when he says to them, "By the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, all of you be in agreement, and **let there be no divisions among you, but be united in the same mind and the same purpose,**" it might sound a little bit ludicrous or naïve at best. Paul sounds like a dreamer, out of touch with reality, thinking that just because we're Christians we can agree on everything. He sounds like someone who's never been to church.

But if we dig a little deeper in this letter, past the ludicrous idea that we might all agree, Paul has something for us, something I find quite compelling.

Paul was trying to do something that hadn't been done before, not just in building the church, and leading several new congregations from afar, which sounds tremendously challenging; but he was trying to bring together people that hadn't been together before. We're not *just* talking about rich and poor or powerful and powerless, which would be difficult enough – but *vastly* divided groups like Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free. Paul was preaching Christ's message that in the new covenant none of those distinctions matter anymore, because everyone is welcome at the heavenly banquet, all can gather around the table to feast on the bread of life. But these divisions were more than Republicans and Democrats, evangelicals and

progressives, Scriptural holiness champions and social justice advocates. If we think *our* divisions are broad today, we might think again when we consider the Corinthian churches.

And yet Paul doesn't just say unity is something they should strive for, or unity is a good goal to have in mind for the long-term. Paul says unity is what Christians do. Unity is who Christians are. Not because we all agree on whether we should have pews or chairs in the sanctuary, hardwood or carpet, organ or piano – or because we have the same ideas about how to read Scripture or who should be in leadership or what the implications of that are. Paul says we're united because of the cross. Because Paul knows that Christian faith is not about right belief or solid theories or the ultimate fate of the universe as much as it's about a way of life.

And that's just it: the cross unites us **in a way of living**. Now, in our time, that might sound like wishful thinking, too – because we don't all even agree on the cross, on its purpose or its place in our faith or what it means theologically. But stick with it for a minute: put aside your views on atonement and your understanding of the cross's role in salvation, whatever salvation means to you – and remember that the cross is essentially about *reconciliation*. It's about God bridging the gap between the earth – humanity – and Godself. The cross is about bringing us together as brothers and sisters in the same body. The cross is about self-sacrifice, one putting others ahead of himself, loving others so much that he gave himself up to care for others, bearing their burdens and celebrating their joys as one.

And if we're united around *that* cross, the cross of reconciliation, the cross of self-giving love, then what unites us isn't belief or dogma or even religious practice – what unites us is a way of life shaped by that self-emptying love we celebrate in God coming to earth to be with us. It's a way of living with one another so that our love for God and our love for each other, our recognition of each other as brothers and sisters in Christ trumps all other differences, whether they be cultural, political, or otherwise. It's like the old song says, "They'll know we are Christians by our love."

And this looks like foolishness to the world.

One of my favorite professors used to say that he goes to church every week to remind himself that this Christian life isn't crazy. When I first heard him say that, I was confused: I grew up believing that the Christian life was the *only* life. I didn't know any different, and thought if you *weren't* a Christian you must be crazy. But the Christian life I grew up in wasn't counter-cultural. It wasn't difficult. It was more about agreeing on dogma and politics than on living lives of self-giving love. And when you think about the way the world works: hierarchies, power-plays, the never-ending call of self-gratification and self-obsession to the detriment of whoever happens to get in the way of your own achievement, giving up part of yourself for the sake of others sounds crazy. Self-sacrifice sounds like self-destruction. Selflessness sounds like sabotage.

But the thing is, if we subdue ourselves in order to be united around this cross, if we focus less on our differences and more on our status as brothers and sisters in Christ, if we are united by the way we live, the way we love each other, then our being made less makes us more. We are strongest when we are most subdued because that is when we are most bonded together. It doesn't make sense to the world, but it's the power of God's grace, the power of community.

There's a song by Andrew Peterson that's been playing a lot on the radio lately, and every time it comes on I almost need to pull the car over, because it moves me nearly to tears –

but not exactly because of what it says... the song is about a love story, about a man and woman who get married when they're very young, and no one thinks they'll make it, but they do it anyway. And he says in the chorus, "We went dancing in the minefields, we went sailing in the storms, and it was harder than we dreamed but I believe that's what the promise is for." He's saying, "Marriage is crazy hard – harder than we ever could have dreamed, and when we said 'I do' we were asking for trouble. But that's why we said vows. And that's why we're still together."

And I believe all that about marriage – that none of us knows what we're getting into when we say "I do" and there are times that will be harder than we ever dreamed, but that's why we've made vows in the presence of community, to get us through those times. But what chokes me up about this song is not sentimentality about marriage or thinking about my own relationship or any other romantic stuff. What chokes me up is thinking about these words in relation to the church. Promising to live together, to work together, to love each other as brothers and sisters – we have no idea what we're getting into when we say we'll be part of this community. We don't know what's going to come up or what's going to tick us off or what issues will divide us. And maybe that's why we make vows when we join the church – to hold us together in those tough times. Because being the family of God *is* much like dancing in the minefields. It's crazy for us to think we can live together in unity. *Unless...* unity isn't about agreement but about a way of life that's based on the selfless love of the cross of Christ. Unless it's about loving each other. Because Jesus didn't ask people to agree with him; he asked people to follow him.¹ And that's something we can do. It's something we're called to do. And it's who we were created to be: brothers and sisters, serving each other, united in love.

We might look like fools to the world, but we'll be fools *together*, following Jesus.
Amen.

¹ William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas' *Lord Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life* has a similar statement in the Introduction.