

“Without Eloquent Wisdom”
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
3rd Sunday after Epiphany

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I’ve been doing some thinking recently about DIVISIONS.
It’s hard to avoid hearing about division these days, right?

Whether it’s the impeachment hearings,
or the upcoming elections this November,
or the growing income disparity in this country,
or even our sisters and brothers in the Methodist Church splitting into
two denominations...

it sometimes feels like division is the order of the day.

So my question for each of us today is quite simple:

What are you doing in your life right now...to create UNITY?
What are you and I doing in our lives right now...to reach across divides,
to build bridges,
to create connection,
to dismantle division?

I don’t ask this question because I’m trying to make anyone feel guilty.
I ask because we all fall into the trap of dividing ourselves, one from
another.

I don’t recall when it was—a number of years ago, to be sure.

Our boys were very young, sitting in the back of the car because neither was
old enough to sit in the front of the car.

And we were driving on the expressway,
and traffic was thick, and someone cut me off,
and I had to swerve to avoid the car that cut me off.

The swerving almost caused me to hit another car.

And my immediate response to the car in front me,
the one that cut me off, was to say—OUT LOUD: “You stupid...”

But just as I was about to say the word going through my mind,
I remembered that my boys were in the back seat.

And they did not need to hear the word that was going through my mind.
So I shouted at that car, “You stupid...TURKEY!”

And I thought to myself, whew!
That was close!

Then I heard a voice in the backseat.
I do not recall which of my children spoke.
I do recall that one of them said, “Dad...Mom says that in our family, we
never call anyone “stupid”!

And I had to admit—my child was right.
I should not have said what I said.

Have you done any thinking about the divisions in our world today?
About how any of us, in our own minds, can turn our world into the good
guys...and the turkeys?

I ask not only because of our world.
I ask because of our text.

Paul is writing to the church in Corinth.
And that church is a DIVIDED church.

They’re not calling each other names, but they are claiming territory.

Some say, “I belong to Paul.”
Some say, “I belong to Apollos.”
Some say, “I belong to Cephas.”
(Which is the Aramaic name for Peter.)

All these divisions in the church, and Paul is beside himself.

So he says to this conflicted congregation:

“Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you?”

“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.

In order to build COMMUNITY in midst of conflict...Paul points the Corinthians to the cross.

I know that we’re not fighting with one another here at Westminster—
like that Corinthian church of long ago.

But we do live a world that’s HURTING,
and DEFENSIVE,
and full of factions and raw feelings OUT THERE right now...

Does the cross of Christ—living by the cross,
with the ethic of the cross,
in the character and nature of the cross—do you think
living that way has the power to build community today...as Paul claimed that it
did long ago?

I’m planning to put the question to a vote.

But before I put the question to a vote, I’m going to give you time to consider it, to think about how you want to vote. And as you do, let me invite you to explore a little more with me what Paul means when he talks about the cross.

Three words.
The first is HUMILITY.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul put it like this:

“And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself and became obedient
 to the point of death—
 even death on a cross.”

According to Paul, the cross is about humility...

In her book *Grace (Eventually)*, Anne Lamott tells the story of the Carpet Guy.

One day, Lamott was driving by a small carpet store and noticed a carpet remnant rolled up outside, leaning against the fence. It looked just perfect for the children’s room at her church, so she pulled over, walked inside, and paid the man behind the desk fifty dollars for the rug.

She brought it to her Presbyterian church and dropped it off in the room where the little kids meet.

But the next day, one of the mothers called Anne to let her know that when they unrolled the carpet, they found a moldy spot in the middle.

The mother had returned the rug to the carpet guy.

“Did you get our money back?” Lamott asked.

“No, his bookkeeper wasn’t there. But he’ll have the money later today.”

Anne goes back with her receipt, asks for the money.

But the carpet guy points to his ledger and tells her that someone came by to pick up the money an hour ago.

“That’s not possible,” she replies.

She calls the mother—did you pick up the money?

No, I thought you were.

Lamott goes back to the man.

“Look,” she says, in her sternest Sunday-school-teacher voice, “I don’t want to make trouble. But no one picked up the money. And I’d like it. Now.”

He points to the ledger that says \$50.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Lamott says.

“I’m from a *Sunday* school. This is for children.”

For good measure, she added, “with *asthma*.”

Well, it only escalated from there, with the man refusing to give back the money, and Lamott calling another friend from the church, and he calls the man, and there’s more anger, and more arguing, and bad language...finally the man writes a check for \$50.

And Lamott immediately goes to deposit the check, only to be told by the teller that she can’t deposit the check, because the rug company has insufficient funds.

Lamott writes, “I sat outside the bank for a while...and started to laugh... Now what am I supposed to do?” she asked God, and after a few minutes, she knew.

So she took the carpet guy some flowers, with the bounced check and a note. The note said: “I am very sorry for the way I behaved. Anne.”

“You want to know how big God’s love is?” she concludes.

“The answer is: it’s very big. It’s bigger than you [and I] are comfortable with.”¹

I think Paul would agree.

The love that God reveals on the cross goes well beyond our comfort zones.

As Paul said to the Romans:

“...at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”

¹ Anne Lamott, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2007. I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Dr. John Buchanan, “Show Great Love,” preached on June 17, 2007 at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, for reminding me of this story in Lamott’s book.

Notice what Paul did NOT say.

Did Paul write that Jesus died on the cross for all the people whom we believe are good people?

No.

Did Paul write that Jesus died on the cross for all Christian or all righteous people?

No.

Jesus died for the ungodly...which means ALL people.

“...while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

It means that God took those two wooden beams, an instrument of capital punishment, and in some mysterious way, God made God’s grace available for EVERYONE.

And so should we.

Living by the cross means we err on the side of grace wherever possible, not just with people we like but with people we don’t like.

It means we strive for non-violent solutions to our conflicts wherever possible, so that the cross is not just an instrument of horror.

But a source of HEALING.

I saw an interview a few years ago with a decorated World War II veteran. His name was Jack Leroy Tueller, and he told this story:

“[It was] two weeks after D-Day. It was dark, raining, muddy. And I’m stressed so I get my trumpet out. And the commander says, ‘Jack, don’t play tonight because there’s one sniper left.’ I thought to myself that German sniper is as scared and lonely as I am. So I thought, I’ll play his love song.”

And he plays his trumpet, against his commander’s advice.

“The next morning here came a jeep up from the beach about a mile and a half away.

“Hey Captain, here’s some German prisoners, getting ready to go to England. One of them keeps saying in broken English, “Who played that trumpet last night?”

And he burst into songs, and he said, “When I heard that number that you played, I thought about my fiancé in Germany, I thought about my mother and dad, about my brothers and sisters, and I couldn’t fire.”

*And he stuck out his hand and I shook the hand of the enemy.
He was no enemy, he was scared and lonely like me.”²*

How did he do it?

How did Captain Tueller take a frightening, stressful, life-on-the-line moment...and turn it into a healing moment?

I don’t know how he did it.

But I do know this.

The kind of love that Captain Tueller played on his trumpet all those years ago is the kind of love we find right there, in the cross.

Because the cross is not only humility,
and it’s not only healing,
it is our deepest HOPE.

It’s the hope that comes from knowing that God is with us, in our greatest sorrows and our worst suffering. And just like God walked through the suffering of Jesus on the cross, not simply observing it, but suffering with Jesus...so does God, in the midst of our trials, suffer with us as well.

² This story can be found at various places on the Internet. I first learned of it from the “On Being” Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/OnBeing/posts/10153833890611876>.

Living by the cross means
that we do not avoid other people's suffering,
and we cannot always FIX other people's suffering.

What we can do is walk through it with them.

As some of you know, the lawyer Bryan Stevenson is speaking at the United Ministries luncheon this coming spring.

Mr. Stevenson's career has involved challenging death penalty cases in which people were unjustly convicted, or working to overturn a life-in-prison sentence for someone who was charged and convicted as a juvenile.

Its grueling work, and while Stevenson has had his share of victories, and even national fame for what he's done, he's also had his share of defeats.

It's work that takes a toll.

Stevenson tells of the time a few years ago when his work at a particular courthouse in New Orleans had wrapped up for the day. He was getting ready to go when he noticed "an older black woman...on the marble steps in the massive court hallway. She looked tired and," Stevenson writes, "wore what my sister and I used to call a 'church meeting hat.'"

Stevenson remembered seeing this woman in the courthouse each time he had come to New Orleans.

She noticed him, motioned for him to come over. Even though she didn't know him, she gave Stevenson a hug and asked that he sit beside her.

"I've seen you here several times," Stevenson said to her. "Are you related to Mr. Caston or Mr. Carter?"

"No, no, no, I'm not related to nobody here," this elderly woman replied. "I just come here to help people. This is a place full of pain, so people need plenty of help around here."

"Well, that's really kind of you."

“No, it’s what I’m supposed to do, so I do it.”

She looked away, then locked her eyes with Stevenson’s:

“My sixteen-year-old grandson was murdered fifteen years ago,” she said, “and I loved that boy more than life itself...”

“He was killed by some other boys. I came to this courtroom for the first time for their trials and sat in there and cried every day for nearly two weeks.

“None of it made any sense. Those boys were found guilty for killing my grandson, and the judge sent them away to prison forever. I thought it would make me feel better but it actually made me feel worse.

“I sat in the courtroom after they were sentenced and just cried....

“A lady came over to me and gave me a hug and let me lean on her. She asked me if the boys who got sentenced were my children, and I told her no. I told her the boy they killed was my child.”

“I think she sat with me for almost two hours.

For well over an hour, we didn’t neither one of us say a word.

It felt good to finally have someone to lean on at that trial,

and I’ve never forgotten that woman.

I don’t know who she was, but she made a difference.”

“I’m so sorry about your grandson,” Stevenson murmured.

It was all he could think of to say.

“Well, you never fully recover, but you carry on, you carry on. I didn’t know what to do with myself after those trials, so about a year later I started coming down here. I don’t really know why. I just felt like maybe I could help someone...that somebody hurting could lean on [me]...”

“All these young children being sent to prison forever, all this grief and violence...I decided that I was supposed to be here to catch some of the stones people cast at each other.”³

³ Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014.

Does the cross—
still have the power to build community,
like Paul claimed long ago?

I said that I was going to take a vote, but now I've changed my mind.

I don't think we need to put our hands in the air.
I think we need to use our hands to go catch some stones.

I want you to take a moment right now,
and picture someone who is not always on the same page as you.

They may have different politics than you.
They may have a different background than you.

But they are also a person who, on any given day, might be hurting.
Just like you.

Can you think of anyone like that in your life?

What would happen if you went to that person,
and you didn't go with eloquent wisdom,
and you didn't go with all the answers...

You just went to that person and offered to catch a few stones.

Do you think it would build a bridge?
Do you think it would help create community?

There's only one way to find out if the Apostle Paul was right.

Amen.