

## **We Belong to Christ**

*1 Corinthians 1:10-28*

Alexandra Mauney

First Presbyterian Church  
Greensboro, North Carolina  
January 26, 2020

### *1 Corinthians 1:10-18*

*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.*

This is the Word of the Lord, and these are the words of the apostle Paul, that dynamic preacher and teacher and leader from the earliest days of Christianity. This is Paul in peak “Paul” mode. In his excitement, he’s a little forgetful – wait, who did I baptize back in the day? – but even his critique of beautiful rhetoric is rhetorically beautiful. He’s just begun a letter to this community he founded with a lovely introduction – hi, I love you because I love Jesus and you love Jesus, you’re doing great, I’m thankful for you – and then he gets right to the point. And the point, for Paul, is this: y’all are arguing about some pretty unimportant things, and I’m here to remind you that those things really don’t matter. What matters is the one thing we all have in common: the gospel of Jesus Christ. Not who baptized you, not which preacher you like the most, not the doctrines you prefer, but the gospel of Jesus Christ, the word-made-flesh, the author of salvation, the risen and wounded one. Paul writes to a people in a very specific place and time – the Roman province of Corinth during the middle of the first

century – and that context is important. But Paul’s words here, as with all the words in Scripture, speak to us across time and space, into the very moment we live in. And so I invite you, as always, to join with this community in discerning what the Spirit is saying to us in this particular text. Because we know that the Spirit is always moving, is always present with us when we gather to worship in this and every space. So what is the Spirit saying to us today about what it means to hold in common the thing that really matters: the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I grew up in upstate South Carolina, and from as early as I can remember, I knew a central truth about what it means to be a South Carolinian. The truth is this: you can know everything you need to know about a person from how they answer the question, “Tigers or Gamecocks?” You ask that question, you know what you need to know. I am not a sports person, never have been (and I’ve come to terms with it), but even I knew from early in childhood that there was something deeply important about whether or not a person was a Clemson or Carolina fan. (And where I come from, “Carolina” means the Gamecocks, not the Tarheels!) I’m not going to get into the specifics of what exactly you could know about a person by knowing their particular affiliation within this binary, nor am I going to reveal my family’s own preferences for either garnet or orange, because I’m not trying to get any angry emails tomorrow. But I am going to tell you that whenever I think about things like group identity and loyalty and allegiances, I think about the Clemson/Carolina rivalry and what it was like at my middle school on the Friday before the annual football game. Lots of exciting middle-school trash talk, hallways full of orange and garnet. You get the picture.

You probably have your own version of this phenomenon. When you think about your early experiences with group loyalty, I imagine something might come to mind. It might be a sports rivalry- I’ve been here long enough to know that I ought to avoid certain wearing shades of blue if I don’t intend to make my case for one of two North Carolina educational institutions and their respective sports teams. But it might be something bigger than that. We’re in an election year in this country, and it’s going to be a significant one, whether or not you’re sick of thinking about it yet. Perhaps you think about political affiliation in the same way that my middle school thought about Clemson vs. Carolina. Deep down, do you think you know all you need to know about somebody if you know their political preferences?

It seems to be a mark of our humanness that we search for ways to divide ourselves according to certain parts of our identity. There’s just something about humans and dividing ourselves into different camps. It’s true today as in all past ages, and we know from Bible texts like this one that it was true for the very earliest Christian communities, too. Factions, groups, camps, whatever you call them... Christians are not

immune to divisiveness, or to letting our group affiliations shape our beliefs about ourselves, others, and the world around us.

This reality is what the apostle Paul identifies as he writes to a community of Christians that he helped to establish, and which is dear to his heart. He starts this portion of his letter with a thesis of sorts: he wants these beloved Christ-followers to be united in their discipleship, to be of the same mind in their identity as Christians who have been claimed by God in the waters of baptism. But he writes, “it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my siblings.” Paul has heard from a woman named Chloe, a leader in the community, that there are disagreements, which really should not surprise Paul. Paul’s world was no more immune to disunity than we are today. But what bothers Paul here is not that there’s disagreement; rather, it’s the *nature* of these disagreements that he’s discouraged by. Chloe has reported that there are factions beginning to bubble up within the Christian community in Corinth, and they seem to be based on people’s allegiances to particular leaders. People are beginning to align themselves with the person who baptized them or the person whose teaching and leadership they most like – Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas – rather than Jesus.

We can probably imagine what these arguments within the Corinthian community looked like, because if we’re honest, we’ve probably seen this happen in our own lives. It is easy to look to a leader or a group we admire within our own Christian community and begin to align ourselves with them. This is not a bad impulse – in the Presbyterian tradition, we believe that leadership in the Church is one among many ways that Christians might faithfully respond to God’s call. So, when skilled and called leaders live into the Spirit’s movement in the community, it is a beautiful and faithful thing. But when we begin to align ourselves with the leaders we follow *more* than the one who calls us all to the life of discipleship, we are forgetting the roots of our identity. We might put Paul’s words into our own context by saying this: “I’ve heard about some disagreements here at FPC. What I mean is that some of you say, ‘I belong to Dr. Shetler’ or ‘I belong to Sid Batts’ or ‘I belong to Neil...or Dolly...or Donna’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’” I’ve not been here long enough to discern whether or not this is a big issue for our community, but putting Paul’s thoughts into our own context does bring things closer to home, doesn’t it? In this period of transition, as we patiently wait for the next update from the Pastor Nominating Committee, wondering whose portrait will one day hang in the Virginia Gilmer room, we have an opportunity to examine ourselves and see where our real commitments and loyalties lie. If we’re honest with ourselves, do we put too heavy an emphasis on things that don’t truly matter as much as our core commitment to being a disciple of Jesus Christ? Do we operate a bit like my middle school on the week before the Clemson/Carolina game, digging deeper into our entrenched beliefs and affiliations?

During our Revival time back in the fall, we were invited even more deeply into this opportunity for examining the core of our call to discipleship. We thought about how if we are disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to live that way, plugging into the community through worship, small groups, giving, and service to the neighborhood and world. These aren't peripheral concerns; they're central to who we are.

Paul continues, addressing his people with some rhetorical questions: Has Christ been divided? Was I crucified for you? Were you baptized in my name? We know how Paul's audience is meant to answer. "No, of course Christ was not divided into pieces, and of course Paul was not the one crucified or the one in whose name we were baptized...no, it wasn't in the name of Paul or any other leader, but in the name of Jesus, God with us." Paul is helping the people in Corinth (and us!) to see the absurdity of their arguments. He's forcing them to envision Christ's literal, physical body, fractured into as many pieces as factions within their community. He's encouraging them to look at themselves and see that even though they might not realize it, they are living in such a way that makes it seem like they worship their leaders rather than the living God. Their quarrels and disagreements stand in stark contrast to the image of the Church as Christ's body, which we get from Paul later in this same letter. In that image, each part of the body has a particular function – the eye does what eyes do, and the foot does what feet do – and when one suffers, they all suffer, and when one rejoices, they all rejoice. The body of Christ is not a divided body. Rather, it is a body with members who differ in nearly every way, with people of diverse gifts, skills, abilities, and ways of living out their discipleship in the world. But it is, nonetheless, *one body with one foundation*, which is the gospel of Jesus Christ. As soon as that foundation shifts, as soon as the central focus of its members wanders to someone or something else, the community ceases to be the most faithful version of itself. Because it is not Paul, or anyone else, who was crucified for us, but Christ. For this reason, in a moment of humor, Paul admits that he's glad he didn't baptize very many people in the community he's writing to. That way, only a few people can claim their allegiance is to Paul rather than to Christ. Even baptism, this central sign of God's grace, has been affected by these divisions, and Paul wants no part in it.

Ever the dynamic writer, Paul ends with this: 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 of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God. This is the heart of the matter; this is what Paul has been working towards throughout this passage.

The Christian community in Corinth has lost sight of the truest commitment they should have, which is to Jesus Christ. And this is not just a true commitment; it is a simple one,

in the best sense. Paul is clear that when he received the call to proclaim the gospel, it was not a call to use complicated language or impressive rhetorical strategies like the famous leaders of his day. It was a call to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, in all its profound beauty and power.

It is easy here to try and reconstruct the world in which the Corinthian Christians were operating, with its particular histories and cultural contexts and social customs, without examining ourselves and our communities. But to do so would be to miss out on the witness of scripture across the ages. As much as the early Christians in Corinth struggled to remain faithful to the central call of Christian discipleship, we struggle, too. As much as that community missed the mark in identifying too closely with secondary identities and leaders and factions, we miss the mark, too.

But the call to faithful Christian discipleship is a continual one; we receive grace again and again, and we are called forth to live into the call again and again. As often as we see the water in the baptismal font, we remember that Christ has claimed us in those waters. As often as we taste the bread and grape juice at Communion, we remember that Christ has nourished us in that meal. As often as we heard the Word read and proclaimed and sung in our worship spaces, we remember that Christ has been present from all eternity and will remain with us to the end of the age. Our worship here offers us these continual reminders of our call, first and foremost, as disciples of the resurrected Christ. When we lose sight of that central identity, we have these reminders that draw us back toward the center.

And so, as we go out from this place into all the other places where we live our lives, I pray that we might remember in a new way that we belong to Christ. We may be a diehard, never-miss-a-game Tarheels or Blue Devil, we may call ourselves a Republican or a Democrat, we may really resonate with one church leader or group over another, but we are *all* followers of the risen Christ. Our commitment to the life of discipleship is one that comes before all of our other affiliations and identities, as central as they may be to how we understand ourselves. This commitment ought to guide our living more than anything else does.

I'll leave us this morning with words from our Presbyterian *Brief Statement of Faith*: "In life and in death we belong to God. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve." May it be so. Amen.