

Unity is not Uniformity

- [1 Corinthians 1:10-18](#)

When my father died, my normally calm siblings broke into conflict over his extensive stamp collection. It was potentially very valuable, and my mother thought to give it to my elder brother Michael but my sisters were incensed. After all, their husbands actually collected stamps and Michael did not. My mother resolved the issue by declaring that they were her stamps and she could do what she wanted with them.

We don't know what caused the conflict in the Corinthian church, though we can be pretty sure it was not a stamp collection.

It is clear from Paul's letter to them that they had broken into factions. It seems that they were dividing themselves according to which evangelist had baptized them. From this distance it is easy to see that that was foolish. But on the ground, I imagine it was not so easy. There are many things that divide people and especially in a time like this when the cultural tendency is to separate, to turn people against each other. It is easy for us to buy into divisiveness, into thinking that all evangelicals think alike or all fundamentalists or all Catholics, and to criticize "them" without attempting to understand their perspective.

Here at St. Benedict's we have been largely conflict free for many years. Which is quite surprising. When you get a group of creative, intelligent people together there is usually some degree of conflict because we all have different opinions. As Deacon Jen put it, conflict occurs whenever two different ideas occupy the same space. A lack of conflict might indicate a lack of engagement, a situation of apathy, but I don't think that is true for us.

Liz Maruska and I were reminiscing this week about the conflict that happened when Judy and Art Stevens left after a ten year ministry here. Ultimately it was resolved by many of those in disagreement leaving the

church. I think that still happens. We don't notice very often, but people who feel that their ideas are not being heard become dissatisfied, begin to be less engaged and ultimately leave. Because they became disengaged first we may not even notice that they have faded away until someone says, "I haven't seen Mary-Jo for ages."

As I retire there will be a significant shift in the system. Things will feel different. Maybe not so much at first because you are used to my going away for a few weeks, but it will be different. And that may bring conflict with it.

In and of itself, conflict is a normal part of being human and living in human community. Paul tells the Corinthians, "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." This can lead us to think that conflict is always unhealthy and when it happens the best thing is to push it underground because we are the people of God and we must be united.

Yet conflict does not need to lead to division and it does not need to lead to one or more parties leaving the playing field. When my father died, my mother resolved the issue by hearing both my sisters' demands and then making a decision which ended it. The Parish Council is able to do that. They can make a decision on behalf of the whole congregation. Episcopal churches are not true democracies. Everyone does not make every decision, which is probably just as well as that would be very inefficient, but Parish Council meetings are open to anyone who wants to attend and Parish Council members are always open to feedback and ideas from everybody else.

We are not a true democracy because we look to Jesus Christ as the head of the church, not just the worldwide church but this little church too. We look to his teaching and his behavior to guide us in how we do things. And what we see is that Jesus did not shy away from conflict, in

fact he walked straight into it. But he did so from a place of love and of seeking to be obedient to God's will.

As you know, the root of the word obedient is listening. To be obedient to God is to listen to God. That is one of the keys to resolving conflict or living with conflict among the people of God. We pray for guidance, and we listen for the answer. And we are willing to live with what we hear. To answer Paul's question, "Has Christ been divided?" We have to say no, Christ is not divided and when we are divided it is either (1) because of ego-based demands for power or recognition or (2) because we are not asking for God's purpose and intention to be made clear to us.

Jesus approached conflict from a place of love and of seeking to be obedient to God's will. It sounds as though the Corinthians had forgotten to love one another. Love will carry us through many a difficult place. Love teaches us to respect and honor those whose opinions are different from ours. There is no place in Christian community for eye rolling – for rolling our eyes about someone else's ideas or stories. There is no place for that kind of disrespect however it is expressed. Because respect is basic to love. Our baptismal vows call us not only to love and serve Christ in all persons, but also to respect the dignity of every human being.

Our political climate says something very different. Our society is full of derision and eye rolling. However you identify politically, the other side is necessarily stupid and misinformed and not worth respecting.

This is not the way of Christ. The path of Jesus is always going to be counter-cultural. Because the path of Jesus is about letting go of ego-based demands and the fear of scarcity. The path of Jesus is one of throwing ourselves with abandon into the arms of God trusting that our needs are being met, so we do not need to fight for them. The path of Jesus is being so secure in the love of God that we do not need to be right all the time. We have choices, we can decide that something is important enough to fight for, or we can decide that it really isn't.

My friends, this takes humility, which is sometimes difficult for us because we associate it with a lack of power or with low self-worth, but Jesus shows us that the path of humility is the path of power. Humility is being so secure in the knowledge of who we are that we can be obedient to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. And that is the path to eternal life, not life that starts when we physically die but life that starts now and continues to grow in us.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters... 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.” Sometimes we confuse unity and uniformity. Later in this same letter, Paul says that it is ok to have different ideas about things like eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols so his call for unity is not a call for everyone to think alike. We want to welcome diversity of background and that means diversity of thought.

This would be a very boring place if we all thought the same way all the time. Uniformity would be dull. There are different ways to do things, there are different preferences about what hymns we sing, about how we do communion, about how to stack the dishwasher. And because we are a diverse people we will disagree.

It is not being in lockstep which brings us together but what Paul calls having the same mind and the same purpose unites us. The same mind and the same purpose which we see in Christ Jesus who is the head of the Body, the church. And that is the shared path of love and obedience, of love and listening; the path of becoming one with God not just as individuals but as a faith community.