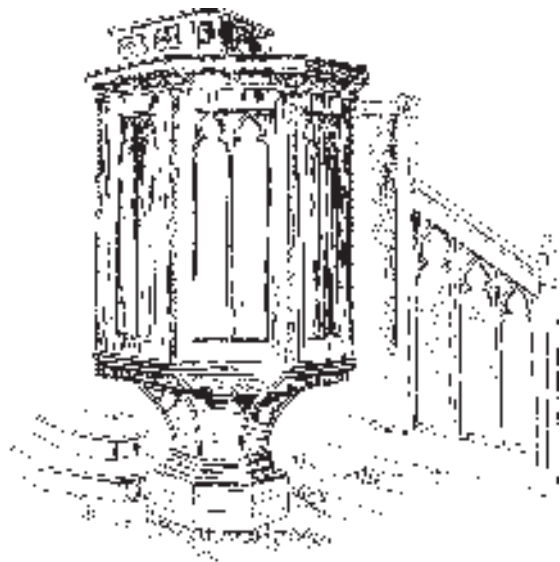


September 20, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Lessons from Corinth
by The Reverend Kay Davis-Dudding

I Corinthians 1:10-17

I met a Methodist minister while at my niece's wedding near Chicago. He was telling me about the first church he served about 25 years ago, and the church fight he experienced. It was a little country church with about 100 members. The church had a problem. The problem being that when he, the new preacher came, he realized that the piano stood between the pulpit and the choir, *and* between the choir and the congregation. (I wouldn't try to figure this out in your mind, because you'll likely get lost somewhere in the narthex, at least I did.) Suffice it to say, that the new preacher wished to have the piano moved, because he couldn't make eye contact with the choir the way he would have liked, and the people in the choir couldn't see the congregation because the old piano was sitting right there in the middle of everything.

And so, one night at the Administrative Board meeting, which must correspond somewhat to the Session in our church, the Board voted to move the piano. "We were just going to move it two feet, six and one-half inches," he told me, "and I didn't think anything much about it. It was my first church," he said. "I was young. I didn't know how people sometimes acted in a church—so we moved the piano."

The next Sunday morning he went to church, and Celeste, who played the piano, was not sitting at the piano, but was sitting instead in the last pew of the church. When he asked her why she wasn't at her

usual spot, she said she couldn't play the piano if it was moved two feet, six and one-half inches. When asked why, she said, "Well, my mother played the piano where it was. My grandmother had played the piano right there, and in fact, my great-grandmother had played the piano there, and I'm not going to play it anywhere else but where it has always been."

Well, before the new preacher knew it, the church had divided—those who thought it high time the piano was moved out of the way, and those who thought it was high time the piano be moved back where it had always been. In fact, he said, the congregation literally divided up with one group sitting on one side of the sanctuary and the other on the other side. This went on for quite a while until the piano was finally moved back two feet, six and one-half inches, at which time Celeste went back to sit where her mother, her grandmother and her great-grandmother had always sat. (This story only reinforced what I've learned over my 17 years in ministry, that there are some battles ministers must realize are just not worth fighting about.)

Well, loyalties existed in the early church too. Take a peek in on Corinth, a little Greek town not far from Athens—once a flourishing city, but now just a whistle stop on Paul's campaign trail. Yet, Paul had a special fondness for the Corinth church: he had helped found it. The church in Corinth is arguing over who should have more privileges—over who is better than whom. It's hard to know the exact nature of the conflict, but I think it's fair to say that the brothers and sisters in Christ in Corinth were in the middle of a great big conflict.

When in Ephesus, Paul hears from Chloe, likely a wealthy woman in whose house the Corinthians used to meet. From her report he hears of the friction, the bickering. He learns the house he loves is divided against itself. It was almost as if there had been no resurrection, no risen Christ. People were turning their loyalties to Paul, to Apollos, to Peter, and some, *only* to Christ. It was almost as if there had been no empty tomb, no unlikely stranger on the road to Emmaus.

Four different groups had arisen. Paul, as the founding missionary of the congregation still had a lot of devoted people and stressed Christian freedom. The Apollos group loved philosophy and eloquence since their leader was refined and polished. He knew about both the world, and scripture, and was (what we might today call) a premier preacher. The Peter group probably placed their emphasis on church authority, and organization. And Jewish Christians, who still clung to some Jewish ways of thinking, were likely having difficulty understanding God's love for Gentiles. And perhaps the Christ group saw themselves as superior because of their personal devotion to Christ, and may have prided themselves on their spirituality and claimed direct communion with God.

We might wonder what happened to that wonderful picture that was painted for us in Acts 2, of the happy disciples, running around, and praising God, and getting into the river to be baptized and breaking bread together, down on their knees praying together, full of hope for the coming kingdom. Well, here in Corinth, the picture was somewhat flawed.

But before we make too much of the dissension, I think it's important to say that differences in the church can, be very good. Churches have broken off from other churches, with variations, even inside of a particular denomination. From my church history class I recalled and found the list which had been made of variations in the Baptist Church in the early part of the last century. Among others there were the Northern and Southern Conventions, the American Baptist Association, the Duck River and Kindred Associations, the General Six-Principle Baptists, the Free-Will Baptists, the Separate Baptists, the Regular Baptists, the Primitive Baptists, and last but not least the Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists. Somehow the name "Presbyterian" pales by comparison. It was also pointed out that in the

Church of God, a branch broke off calling itself the True Church of God, and then another, called the Only True Church of God!

Doctrinal diversity in the New Testament churches is, in some ways very healthy. Though they each called the others heretics, each saw part of the truth about Christ and his church—none saw the whole. But it is the New Testament as a *whole* which gives us the fuller picture.

When Paul says to the Corinthians to be of one, or the same mind, we have to wonder just how that would play itself out. Certainly he can't mean thinking the very same way about everything. Sometimes, being of the same mind can be limiting—and boring, where differences can create a richer, fuller, whole.

Some people say the problem with Presbyterian meetings is that they are so dull. It's good when we get into good theological discussion over things that *really* matter. As long as we get together as brothers and sisters in Christ, we have the right to disagree over things that *really* matter!

Sometimes, the issues are of major importance, and other times they seem so silly we're embarrassed that we've talked about them at all. Some people believe that every man ought to wear a tie to church. Some people believe it is okay to wear a pair of jeans. Some people believe very deeply that only inclusive language should be used, and some don't believe that at all. Some people feel the church ought to give most of its money to missions. Others feel as if the church's first priority should be the nurturing of its members.

As in a good marriage or deep relationship, so also in the church, the right to disagree enriches our relationships and helps us to grow as God's people. A real friend is a person with whom we can disagree, knowing that mutual respect and affection are not at stake. Yes, differences can be good.

And yet, they can also be destructive. We know this side of the story, too. In Corinth, the differences were not only doctrinal, but personal, pushing their own positions to the exclusion of others, of the larger church. The right to disagree had been lost. The very existence of the congregation was threatened. The church consisted of factions, instead of believers in Christ. Each group tried to gather others to its way of thinking, to lobby for its own way. And somehow, that fractured picture is repeated today. Someone or some group is misunderstood or someone or some group holds on, with feet dug in, holds on too tightly to old ways of doing things as the only way; or someone or some group believes that change, only for change's sake, is the only way. And you have to wonder, what's the matter with us? Can you hear the echo of our own voices, "It's my church, and I know best!" "No, it's mine, and I've got the right answer."

You can almost hear Paul in the background cajoling his congregation at Corinth, "Were you baptized in the name of your factions? Did your factions go to Calvary for you?" When we dispute too much in the church, not speaking the truth in love, Paul's voice rings like a haunting refrain, "Is Christ, divided?" When this happens in a church, the harmony becomes disharmony. It would be as if for the last hymn, instead of singing, "God You Spin the Whirling Planets" #285 as printed in our bulletin, each of us turned to a different hymn number and began singing!

What can we do? We can turn our ears from the voices of factions, and listen for God's voice, the voice that lifts us out of our self-centeredness and into a new "oneness." We listen for God's voice over our shoulder on the Emmaus road, or, like Mary Magdalene, we hear God calling us by name. And, if we listen for God's voice, then God's voice helps all our voices come together—in God.

We don't do very well getting together on our own. Sooner or later we learn a simple fact, and that is that not all church schizophrenia can be solved by just listening to the other side, or deciding to be "friends," like it or not; or by appealing to our common humanity; because, in the end, these all fall short. Only because of Christ, do people get together to do what we do here in this place. Think about it! We worship, and pray, and sing together not because of who we are, but because of *whose* we are.

And by the way, there is more to the story about that little Methodist church. Not long after the piano incident, Celeste, the uncompromising piano player, got cancer. During the course of her illness, which was long and difficult, both those who had been opposed to moving the piano and those in favor of moving it, rallied around Celeste. They brought her meals everyday. They took care of her family. They mowed her grass, came to her home and bathed her and cleaned her house. They did all they could for Celeste, because there was something in that little country church that united them, that went far deeper than their disagreement over where the piano ought to be.

I do sense this September Sunday in 2009 in Westminster Presbyterian Church a great deal of excitement and a shared vision; but I also know there are issues now, and will likely be others at some time in the future, which might make us choose up sides. I pray that we will be kind to one another, that we will forgive one another, and that we will give thanks to God that the power of the cross is so great, that even regular sinners like you and me can be redeemed and made fit to live together in community.

Let us pray. Teach us again, patient God, for we so easily forget. Teach us again that we cannot say to anyone else in the body of Christ, "I have no need of you." Christ is not divided. We pray in the name of him who makes us one, even Jesus the Christ. Amen.