

Spoons
I Corinthians 3:1-9
Colebrook Congregational Church
February 19, 2017 / Seventh Sunday After Epiphany

[There was some deviation between what is written below and what was spoken from the pulpit]

Today's selection comes from one of Paul's most famous Epistles, the Letter to the Corinthians, and addresses an issue of division and unity.

Corinth is in Greece and was a very important city in the ancient world. Corinth is located on, and controls the isthmus that separates the rivals of Athens and Sparta, and the Aegean Sea from Ionian Sea, putting it in a position to totally control warfare and commerce in the region. And also because sailing was very dangerous back then, it was safer and cheaper for boats in the Aegean to go to Corinth, pull their boats out of the water, and drag them across the isthmus to the Ionian on the other side, with assistance from the city-state for a small fee, of course.

By the time of Paul, Corinth had become the wealthiest and most important city in Greece, the capital of the Roman province, and a commercial center of about 600,000 people. Modern scholars have nicknamed Corinth, the Las Vegas of the Ancient World.

And in to this went Paul, as the first Christian Missionary to Greece, shortly after the Council of Jerusalem, which was called to settle a conflict that arose in Antioch. And this is important to the context here, because of what that experience did to Paul and what it did to Christianity as a whole, so it has effected what Paul is talking about here. The first Christians were actually Jewish, and were seen as a sect of Judaism. However, as the movement spread, especially through the efforts of Paul, Gentiles wanted to join, but some of the Jewish rules, like circumcision and keeping kosher, was proving to be a hindrance, and the conflict came to a head in Antioch between Jewish Christians following Peter & James and the Gentile converts of Paul. There was concern over what Paul was teaching.

The Council of Jerusalem was called around 50 AD, recalling Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and other Apostles, back to meet with James and the other elders of the Jerusalem Church. There was debate and discussion, and it was decided that they should not make it more difficult for the Gentiles to turn to God. Converts did not need to undergo circumcision to fulfill the Covenant of Abraham, however they are to follow certain Torah rules, which can be summed up by: Don't be like the pagans.

So this Council was trying to increase a sense of unity among the Followers of Jesus, giving clear instructions for proselytizing to the Missionaries, as Paul was doing in Corinth; however, it also started the division that would separate Christianity from Judaism.

After this, Paul partners up with Silvanus and Timothy, who has two letters in the Bible named after him, and then they head off to Greece. On the way to Corinth, they meet up with a couple of Jewish-Christians from Rome named Priscilla and Aquila, who are mentioned several times in the Book of Acts, and Paul's Letters. Aquila later became one of the first Bishops; and Priscilla was the first female preacher, probably a Presbyter, and one of the possible authors of the Letter to the Hebrews.

All together, they started the church in Corinth and then moved on to Ephesus, where they met Apollos, who was also preaching about Jesus, but apparently was lacking on some theological points, being described as only knowing the Baptism of John the Baptist and not the Baptism of the Spirit. Priscilla and Aquila taught him, and then Paul had full confidence in Apollos, sending him to Corinth to help the church there grow.

However, what happens instead, is that the Corinth Church is plagued by divisions. There are four factions there, and they identify themselves as being followers of either Paul, Apollos, or Peter, and there was distrust between them.

This wasn't the only problem that was happening in Corinth. It is thought that Paul may have actually written up to five letters to the Corinthians, and that three of them have been lost to time. This issue of division and unity is just the first of many problems that Paul is trying to address.

And Paul devoted the first three first chapters of his Letter to this issue. He started by arguing that the factions are effectively putting men, including himself, in place of Jesus; then he reminds them of Jesus' sacrifice for us; then starting in the second chapter with the argument that true wisdom is not possessed by any of the factions, and our selection is Paul's application of this argument.

Even though Paul is addressing baptized Christians, he accuses them of not having the Spirit, because of their divisiveness, and uses a term to characterize them that is translated into an English euphemism, "of the flesh." Remember that Corinth is the Las Vegas of the ancient world! And their patron deity was Aphrodite, whose temple dominated the skyline of the ancient city. Paul is using this context to get through to them, to shock them out of their distrust and animosity. Because, that sort of thing does not help a Church or Jesus. The young church would not be able to grow or to even survive like that.

Paul then goes on to his final argument on this topic, saying that all the factions have made the same basic error; that the Apostles are in competition with one each other, when in reality, they are like co-workers.

It is understandable why these factions came about. At this point in the early church, it's the first generation, there wasn't much in place to encourage unity. The Twelve and Paul start spreading the Word, and then people follow them, and become Missionaries themselves, and a lot of them are unaware of the others doing the same thing. The Gospels haven't been written yet. The Didache, from which all Christian worship and organization is based, is still a century away from being written. There are no formal pastors yet to help guide congregations. There were no Bishops, nor Pope in Rome, nor Patriarch in Constantinople to direct things. It was just faithful people talking to people seeking faith; and they're trying to bring people together.

Paul tells the Corinthians that he and Apollos are acting as Apostles, as Servants of God, and that's what was important. It's not who they are, it's what they are. Sure, they both did the start-up work, but it was God who gave the growth, that's the most important part. So holding to fractiousness is pointless and harmful to the community. Paul insists that all those who do God's work are equals, they are fellow workpeople for God. That is what's important.

A modern equivalent of what Paul is raising up as his example about factions would be if we Congregationalists would say that we are of Jonathan Edwards; Methodists would say that they are of John Wesley; Catholics would say that they are of Saint Peter or of Pope Francis; and the Orthodox would say that they are of Saint Andrew. But we don't, or we shouldn't, because we are all of Jesus, we are all Christians first and foremost. And nearly every denomination has recognized that we are all of Christ and can accomplish great things when we work together and not in competition. That's why there are organizations like the UCC, the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, and even local area Council of Churches & Synagogues.

I once saw a promotional video, which I sent out in the weekly newsletter, produced by Caritas, as part of a campaign to address hunger issues, and it was based on a story called the Allegory of the Long Spoons. I looked into the story, and it is attributed to Rabbi Haim of Romshishok, an itinerant Lithuanian preacher. I discovered that there are similar variations found in the folklore of cultures from Western Europe to China, and that it has been used in many different ways, illustrating using one's own gifts, cooperation, conflict resolution, and more.

The basic story that Rabbi Haim told was that he was given a tour of Heaven and Hell. He was led into a banquet hall and found a feast laid out, but it was in disarray and the people were suffering. This was because they only had really long spoons and their arms were in splints to prevent them from bending. They couldn't feed themselves. The Rabbi went into the other room to see an exact copy of the feast, the people with the same long spoons and

splints, but everyone was happy and sated. They were feeding each other. The Rabbi ran back to the other room to tell them, but they wouldn't listen. They cared more about feeding themselves than helping one another.

That is the base that all the other variations come from. The Caritas variation that I sent out, it was very monochromatic, and showed hungry people around a pit with a bowl of soup in the center. They all try to get some for themselves and they are not able to do so. They start to fight with one another in their frustration. One almost falls into the pit, soup is knocked out other spoons, and one attacks, breaking someone else's spoon, so now that person has no hope of eating.

What this video, based on the allegory, has illustrated to this point is how when a group is divided, it cannot accomplish its goals. When we only worry about ourselves, we come up short, like the inability to eat the food off the spoon. When we sabotage others, we put people in danger, like how the one knocking the soup out of other's spoons, almost caused someone to fall into the pit. When we attack others, we exclude them, like how the attack broke someone's spoon, taking away even the possibility of being able to get to the soup.

But then, as the one with the broken spoon gives up on eating, someone from across the pit took some soup into a spoon and offers it to that person instead. The others were shocked at first, but helped steady the spoon with their own. They then see that they can feed each other, and everyone would be able to eat, and as they do this, the video shifts from monochrome into color, becoming a beautiful new world.

The group in the video started off making the same basic error as the Corinthians in today's selection. They assumed that they were in competition with each other, going so far as, if I can't have soup, you can't have soup. By competing for the food, no one got to eat. But by working together, by realizing that they are in it together, with the same goals, everyone could eat the soup. Likewise, for the Corinthians, by competing with each other in factions, the Good News could not spread. And by recognizing their mutual goal of spreading the Gospel and that they are all of Christ, they could accomplish so much more.

The division and factions prevented growth and fellowship in that early Corinthian church, but it holds true for any organization. It is in human nature to argue and disagree, and that is fine to a point, but as Paul tells us, we must remember that we all have the same goal, to do God's work in our community, that we are only able to do so effectively by remembering that we are not competitors, but co-workers in accomplishing that goal. We must avoid the pitfalls of fractiousness, and remember that we are of Christ.

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

Loving God, we know we are too often mere infants in faith. We can argue over big things and little things, and as we do so, we forget to work together to achieve greatness in Your name. Forgive us when we fail to remember that our growth in the faith is a matter of being Your servant, working together with all other servants of God, in Your Creation. Amen.

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

[PAUSE]

O God who welcomes all in love, to You we pray for the good of Your church, our community, and the concerns of those in need. We lift up our hearts in faith to You, the one who hears all prayers and holds close all of Creation.

We thank You for the opportunities You give us to act and serve in Your name, for the blessings of our lives, and for those You have sent to aid us in our times of need.

God of Hope, hear us as we confess that which weighs us down, that which has caused our missteps, when we fall short of what You have Called us to be. Save us from all foolishness and guide us to Your wisdom. And remind us of our brokenness and Your grace as we encounter brokenness in others.

We offer our prayers for our family and loved ones, for neighbors and strangers. Grant them health & wellness of mind, body, and spirit; peace, reconciliation, and safety from all harm in conflicts worldwide; may the causes of division and hatred be brought down, and for comfort for those who find themselves grieving; or in uncertain situations. We pray for the caregivers and our protectors, guide them and keep them safe.

We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, to help us consider this day how we live our lives and how to choose the directions we take, and for Your strength of spirit to do what is right, and to act generously towards all, full of Christ's Love. May we also remember to have the patience needed while living in a chaotic world. Inspire us to follow Christ's Way, making us instruments of Your Love in our community.

We especially pray for:

Loving God, as we have promised You our devoted service in words and prayer, give us the strength of Your Holy Spirit to enable us to keep our promises, for You are the source of our lives and our strength, Amen.

Psalm 119:1-8

119:1 Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD.

119:2 Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart,

119:3 who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways.

119:4 You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.

119:5 O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!

119:6 Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.

119:7 I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous ordinances.

119:8 I will observe your statutes; do not utterly forsake me.

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.