

SR01414 First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

The Rev. Dr. John Judson

“Foundations: Cooperation”

Genesis 2:18-24;

I Corinthians 1:10-17

January 26, 2014

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I want to begin this morning with a Christian denomination quiz. So get out something to write with so you can write down your answers...to see how much you know. Question number one is, how many Presbyterian denominations are there in the United States? Write down your answer. The second question is, how many denominations are there in the United States? The number I will give you in a moment refers to those groups which claim to be denominations. The third question is, how many independent churches are there in the United States? These are churches which claim no official relationship with any other church. Finally how many denominations are there in the world? OK, let's see how well you did. There are 28 Presbyterian denominations in the United States. We are the largest and the smallest has two churches. There are 217 denominations in the United States...so Presbyterians make up more than 10% of all denominations in the US. Third, there are about 35,000 independent churches in this country. Finally, there are close to 38,000 denominations world-wide.

I have to say that these figures should surprise me, but they don't. They don't because somehow the urge, not to merge, but to separate seems to be part of the DNA of the Christian church. We can see this by taking a quick look at Paul's letter to the church at Corinth. Paul has barely said hello when he jumps all over them because they are tearing the church apart. They are tearing it apart by dividing into factions that each claim to be better than the other. Those who follow Paul think that they are better than those who follow Apollos. Those who follow Peter think that they are better than those who follow Jesus. Granted this may seem a bit strange, but remember what Amy told us last week about Corinth. It is a city to which freed slaves could go to make their fortune. They could work hard, climb the social ladder and prove that they are better than everyone else. This competitiveness did not go away at the church door. Paul is appalled and says so without mincing words.

Paul jumps all over them for two reasons. First he does so because this is not the way the people of God are supposed to act. According to Paul they are to be united in the same mind and purpose. What this does not mean is that they have to agree on everything. What it means is that they are to cooperate in the face of difference. One way to see how this cooperating in the face of difference is supposed to work is to turn to our Old Testament text. This is the second creation story. Whereas the first creation story is soaring and lyrical (...and God spoke and it was so...) this one is very earthy and portrays God as almost a "wuz up" kind of God. After all this story begins with God making Adam, then upon realizing that Adam could not care for creation alone, or accessorize himself, God makes a bunch of potential help-mates...sort of the original bachelor. When none of the animals will do, God creates Eve, out of Adam. While Adam recognizes that Eve is "bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh" he also knows that she is different. What this says to us is that in the very beginning of creation God designed different people...with the expectation that they would cooperate in caring for God's creation.

Secondly Paul jumps all over them because he knew that while God's original vision might have been on vacation for a while, it had come home in and through the person of Jesus Christ. Paul's appeal is made to the church in and through Jesus. It is made based on the opening words of this letter on which Amy preached last week. The people in the Corinthian church were new people with new identities.

They were people called, set apart and enriched by God so that they were not lacking in any spiritual gift...meaning they had everything they needed to cooperate and carryout the mission and witness of the church which was to bless the world. It didn't matter how different they were; rich or poor, successful or unsuccessful, slave or free, Greek or Jew, male or female or anything else. All that mattered was that because of their new identity they were called to cooperation in the work at hand.

Unfortunately for much of its history, as our opening survey pointed out, the church has somehow failed to grasp this idea. Instead of being willing to be different, disagree about some things and still cooperate, many Christians have declared that they know more and better than others and so they start their own denomination or church. Fortunately though, this is not always the case. Fortunately the Spirit is still at work helping Christians to hear Paul more clearly. There are bright spots in the world. One is that this week I met with pastors from several non-Presbyterian churches to talk about our joint Good Friday service. A second is that in a few weeks I will meet with pastors, priests, rabbis and Imams to discuss how we can help Detroit. Finally, the brightest spot of all for me...is you...is this church. I say that because we do not agree on everything. We disagree about politics. We disagree about theology. We disagree about which college is the best..."hook em' horns." We disagree about what car to drive. Yet here we are. Here we are week in and week out worshipping together; praying together; learning together; serving together. We are here cooperating as a community to cultivate mission, inclusion and community. We are cooperating in order to bless the world. You are a bright spot in the Christian constellation.

My challenge to you then is this, to ask yourselves this morning, how is my new identity in Christ encouraging me to cooperate not only in this church, but in the wider world with those who differ from me, in order to bless God's creation?