

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

Dr. Thomas P. Harp

January 27, 2008

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

Saying No to a Partisan Spirit

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

We're going to start this sermon by singing different hymns to the same tune. So please open your hymnals to the hymn I assign you. Remember you won't be singing the tune that is printed in the hymnal. You'll be singing those words to a different tune. Right section (on my left) and choir basses, Hymn #158. (158) Center Right and choir tenors, #210. (210) Center Left and choir altos, #241. (241) Left section and choir sopranos, #397. (397) (That's 158, 210, 241, 397) Jim and Julie will play the tune, Amazing Grace. Now for this to work, each one of us must try to out-sing everybody else in the room. We want them to hear us after all. Jim & Julie will play through the melody once. Then we'll all sing the first verse of our hymns together.

(Sing)

Now wasn't that special? I think that's what partisanship sounds like. Each group was singing it's own song as loudly as possible and nobody was really listening to anybody else. Apparently that's what was going on in the church at Corinth. One group boasted that they'd heard the gospel from Paul, himself. Another group claimed that Apollos was their man. Besides, everybody agreed that he was a more eloquent preacher than Paul. Still another group claimed Peter as their champion. Then, as if to put all those others in their places, a fourth group claimed to be the true Christians: they belonged to Christ. Imagine everybody singing their own words, probably to different tunes. No wonder Paul says Stop!

Well our national Presidential campaign is fully underway. The Florida primary is only a couple of days from now. Some of you have voted already. But whether you have voted or not, you have more than likely chosen up sides. The editorial pages are full of letters supporting one candidate or another. It's as if everybody were singing different words to the same song, each one trying to sing louder than the others. And what do you know, there's even a candidate named Paul on the ballot!

Now I'm not about to sing any of those political songs from the pulpit although I have my own preferences. Because while the presidential campaign is important, and it really does matter which candidate is elected, none of that matters eternally. What I mean to say is, these United States have been served poorly and they have been served well by Republican presidents and by Democrat presidents. And if we forget that, if we get lost in our partisanship as if the only hope we have is our favorite candidate we will have forgotten that we are one nation under God. And quite frankly it is more important that we remain united as one nation under God than it is for one party to triumph over the other.

Trouble is, people in the church choose up sides as well. And that's certainly not a recent development as should be clear from Paul's letter written somewhere around 1950 years ago. Seems the people of the Corinthian Church sent a letter to Paul asking him questions about their common life together. They asked about circumcision, marriage and divorce, and sexual relationships. They asked about eating food that had been offered to idols and about sharing their food with each other. They asked him about Spiritual gifts, which reminds me that John Rist

wants me to invite you to a Spiritual gifts workshop that is coming up. Look for info about that in today's Bulletin. They asked about the resurrection of the body and last, but not least, they asked Paul about giving money to the church.

What they didn't say in the letter, Paul found out from those who carried the letter to him. Seems the letter asking questions arose in a atmosphere of partisanship. The Corinthian Christians were not only asking about issues raised in the letter, they were choosing up sides and fighting amongst themselves, each believing that he was right and the others were wrong. "It has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you," Paul wrote in apparent understatement. You can almost hear it. "Well Paul said this about that," one group was saying. "So who cares what Paul said, Apollos said this," another group was saying. "A pox on Paul and Apollos! We met Peter himself, and Peter said this about that," proclaimed a third group. "Peter, shmeeter, we are the true Christians, we listen only to Christ and Christ says..." Imagine a congregation so badly divided.

Of course we don't really have to imagine that, do we? While to my knowledge we don't have a congregation that is divided, I think we can all agree that we are part of a denomination that has had its share of quarrels and division. And Presbyterians aren't alone. Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists and lots of other national churches have been torn apart by quarrels. Not unlike the church at Corinth some people have appealed to Paul, others have appealed to Peter, and, yes, some have claimed to be the really true Christians, the only honest to God pure and holy representatives of Christ.

To all of that, to the people of Corinth and to the people of today, Paul practically screams, Stop! Stop the partisanship! I suspect that many of us feel like screaming along with him. "Why can't we all just get along?" Rodney King asked some years ago after being beaten by the Los Angeles Police. It's a question we all are asking, I think. Trouble is, at the same time we're asking the question, each one of us continues to sing our own song, trying to drown out the other singers who are singing their own songs. And when we do that, when we play the partisan game, which really isn't a game, when we do that, we are every bit as much a part of the problem as those other people are.

"Is Christ divided into little pieces?" Paul asks. Is Christ broken into different hymns? Were you baptized in the name of Paul or Apollos? Of course not! We are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. We are called to be one in Christ, to seek the mind of Christ, and to let the mind of Christ shape us, that we may be one. Does that mean we have to agree on everything? I don't think so. Some of you may like this green carpet. Some of you may wish it were red or blue. Me? I'd just like to fix this parquet floor! But enough of that. We don't have to agree on every issue. It would be nice if we did agree, but we don't have to agree about such matters as medically safe abortion, the ordination of gays and lesbians, or whether the Republicans or Democrats do a better job of governing. We do have to agree, however, that we are one in Christ, that it is Christ who unites us. And Paul calls us to live in that unified reality, not dividing up into little groups who consider themselves superior to those with whom they disagree.

Shouldering the cross of Christ forbids our feeling superior to anyone for whom Christ died. And last I looked, Christ died for everyone. Shouldering the cross of Christ rules out boasting about who baptized us, which church we belong to, which teacher we prefer, how faithful we are, and other such partisan matters. The cross of Christ stands in stark contrast to the bitter divisions created by human pride and sinfulness. In Christ we are called to be one. That does not mean we have to agree on everything, as nice as that might be. It does mean that in our humility we acknowledge Jesus as Lord over all of us, even those who differ from us.

Listen. We were able to sing those different hymns together at the beginning of this sermon because different as they were we were singing them to the same tune. While it sounded odd because we were singing different words, nevertheless it actually sounded pretty good because we were united in one song. So, in closing, I will, with Paul, point towards a more excellent way. Let's stand and sing the first verse of Amazing Grace #280, all singing melody together. Then, listen to the choir as it sings the second and third verses in harmony. On the fourth and fifth verses, let's all sing again, singing melody or harmony as you prefer. (Hymn 280. All together on the first verse. Choir only on the second & third verses. All together again on the last two verses.)

(Sing)

Wasn't that a glorious and moving sound, the sound of a church united even in the midst of diversity? That really is special! Imagine what we can do if we work together that way! In church or outside it, say "No!" to a partisan spirit and "Yes!" to our Lord, Jesus Christ.