

Removing Obstacles

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Our church has an important mission. We are called to witness to the good news of God's love that was shown to us in Jesus Christ, to bring people into a fellowship in which God's love is shared, and to help people grow into followers of Jesus Christ. There are people, in our community who are hungry for the love of God that we were given to share. Our church has been commissioned to teach the way of love that is the hope of the world. Our church has an important mission in our community and in our world today.

Doesn't it make sense that we should organize the whole life of our church around the accomplishment of that mission? It makes sense that we should be careful not to hinder the accomplishment of our mission.

Paul wrote his letters to the Corinthians, in part, because he had heard that some things were going on in that church that contradicted the gospel and that were a hindrance to the mission of that church. In his letters, he tried to bring those things to the surface and to set them in the context of the Christian faith so that the Corinthian Christians would know what to do about them. The things that Paul said to the Corinthians can help us put things in a proper perspective, too.

Paul had heard that there are divisions in the church and that the people are quarreling with one another rather than being united in the same mind and purpose.

At first glance, it appeared that something like denominations were emerging as the churches meeting in different houses in the city chose to give their allegiance to one or another of the leaders of the church with whom they were familiar. Some were still dedicated to Paul, the one who had organized their church and brought many into the Christian faith. Others were attracted to another leader who had come after Paul, an attractive young man named Apollos who had received an excellent education in Alexandria, one of the greatest centers of learning in the ancient world. Still others had been in contact with Peter, the one who had been the leader of the followers of Jesus and who would represent a more conservative kind of Jewish Christianity. And there seemed to have been some who took a superior attitude and said, "We belong to Christ," just to get above the other divisions.

These could indeed have been divisions along the lines of significant theological differences - or they could have been divisions based on the personal attractiveness of the different leaders. But, in fact, it eventually became apparent that neither of these was really what was dividing the church. Differences don't have to cause divisions. Differences of opinion can be lived with in a community of loving people who are committed to one common purpose. Paul suspected that something else was going on in Corinth. Surprisingly, it was something very similar to something that goes on in our society.

You see, Corinth was a major center of commerce, a business-oriented city. And it was a new city whose life was not built around any old aristocratic structures. Some people had become very rich, and some people were very poor and there were some people on each step of the ladder in between. And it was a place where upward mobility was possible. People could climb the social and economic ladder. Many people were preoccupied with doing just that - and many others were trying to think of reasons for claiming to be superior to others in other ways. There was competition for status and honor.

That was what was really the conflict that was dividing the church in Corinth.

There is a lot of that going on in our culture too. If a person's real religion is what is shaping his or her life, then there are many whose real religion has to do with their commitment to getting ahead, even though they profess the Christian faith. It is hard to keep the things that are important to us from influencing the shape of our faith.

This competitive jockeying for positions of honor and stature had evidently invaded the church in Corinth. Petty jealousies, snobbishness, and quarreling were being played out in the conflicts over real issues. Divisions were appearing within the church. People outside of the church could probably see what was happening better than

those who were inside the church. The quarreling made the church unattractive to those who needed to be attracted to the Christian faith. And the snobbishness of some made others feel unwelcome.

It would be easy for us to start pointing fingers at one another. That would be exactly the opposite of the results Paul hoped to accomplish. Instead, let us each look within and see if there are any attitudes or actions in our lives that might contribute to conditions that could hinder the mission of our church.

Paul reminded the Corinthians - and us - that we all have our status in the presence of God as a gift of grace. None of us can claim any standing in the presence of God because of who we are in the community or because of what we have done or because of our goodness or our wealth or our education or even because of our faithfulness. We are saved by grace. Paul said, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise ... so that no one might boast in the presence of God" (1 Corinthians 1:27, 29). Paul did not say that to cut us down. After all, we have been freely given the role and status of beloved children of God. That is far better than anything we could achieve or claim for ourselves. We should find great joy and self-confidence in that. But, since the best thing that we have is something that has been freely given to us and to others, none of us ought to feel superior to others. We are all part of one family. Paul also reminds us that the real sign of Christian maturity is not some kind of intellectual or spiritual or cultural sophistication, but the ability to love.

Again and again, Paul reminds us that we should put our mission first and be of one mind and purpose.

Paul makes it very clear that he believes that diversity will strengthen the church if people love each other and live in a shared commitment to one purpose.

Some time ago, a church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, placed an advertisement in Tulsa World inviting the lapsed to return to church. The ad especially welcomes "singles, twice divorced, under thirty, gay, filthy rich, black and proud, poor as dirt, can't sing, no habla Ingles, married with pets, older than God, workaholics, bad spellers, screaming babies, three times divorced, passive-aggressive, obsessive-compulsive, tourists, seekers, doubters, bleeding hearts ... oh, and you". Someone asked, "If they all came, could they all get along?" Paul would answer, "If they have the love of God in their hearts, they can."

What will people find when they come to visit our church? Will they find us sharing love with one another and working together in the service of one purpose? Will they find us eager to welcome them into the fellowship and to make a place for them? I believe they will.