

January 23, 2005/Third Sunday after Epiphany/David L. Edwards

Follow the Living Christ

I Corinthians 1:10-18 *Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*

Matthew 4:18-23 *Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.*

There were problems in the community of Christians at Corinth. There was quarreling (*eris*=from which we get “heresy”) and quarreling, as petty as it might be, tends to grow into real divisions (*schismata*=”schisms”). And that breaks Christ himself into pieces, for the community of Christ is, as Paul reminds us, the very earthly presence of Christ. Just as God was embodied in Christ, so Christ is embodied in his community. Folks look at us and they see, or don’t see, Christ himself. It’s that simple and that scary. It puts the burden on us to manifest Christ in our life together.

It’s a serious problem, and Paul sets out to deal with it, caringly but bluntly.

The problem is, says Paul, that some of you are saying you belong to this or that person—Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or even Christ. You’ve attached your loyalty to the person who baptized you, who brought you into the faith. You’ve woven your faith around that person. Now you have these little groups, each insisting on its own way or truth or rightness.

I read this passage for years before I realized that Paul wasn’t talking about insidious spiritual leaders trying to gain a following to promote their own programs and viewpoints, or to otherwise feed their own egos. That also happens in the church. But the folks Paul mentions are not bad folks. In fact, they are outstanding spiritual leaders. Paul himself. Apollos, whom we read about elsewhere as an eloquent and effective teacher and public speaker (Acts 18:24-28). Cephas, or Peter, central figure of the church in Jerusalem. And Christ himself. How, we might wonder, can Christ become divisive? It happens when we make our understanding of Christ the only one and demand that others agree, whenever we find ourselves thinking that we are the TRUE Christians or church. We reduce the fullness of the living Christ to a particular doctrine or a spiritual, theological, or political program. Paul is saying that we get ourselves and the community of faith in trouble whenever we attach ourselves to ANY human being and center our loyalties around that person—Paul, Apollos, Cephas.

Others will point us significantly and meaningfully to Christ. But, in the words of a Zen Buddhist saying, we must not mistake the finger pointing to the moon for the moon itself. We must each meet Christ in our own lives and find our own faithfulness to him.

We all have those who have deeply influenced our spiritual lives, either through personal relationships or through our reading and study. Bev Cosby was such a person. For me, it was my dear professor of theology Bill Barr, along with many others over the years. We need and are grateful for such teachers and spiritual guides. But Paul warns that we are on a slippery slope when we make any human being the central influence of our lives. We need spiritual teachers, but we are not to attach to them. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross said this about having teachers in our lives: *All my learning has involved crossing the paths of people who became my teachers. My best teacher in the world was a black cleaning woman at the University of Chicago...If not for her, I would not be, today, where I am. I would not have written a book on death and dying; I would not have been able to stick it out with my dying patients. After [her] other people came, and they were usually not big shots in academia. They were just special, very special human beings who crossed my path at the right time and the right things happened...Those were my teachers...I never had a guru. I never had one person I could go to. Life brought certain people to me, we crossed paths, and they stayed for a while. (Tying Rocks to Clouds: Meetings and Conversations with Wise and Spiritual People, by William Elliott).*

Kubler-Ross expresses a wisdom found in all major spiritual traditions. We need teachers, but we are not to hold onto them. She goes on to say that it is the time between our teachers that is the hardest. That is when we are faced with our own lives and the necessity to take responsibility for our lives. The hardest times, but the most important. We must live our own lives as ourselves, find our own relationship with God and live out of that. We take from others what we need at a particular time but must always turn again to live our own lives. When we hold onto others and elevate them to a place of central influence in our lives, we risk becoming dependent upon them, failing to live our own unique lives. We never find our own wisdom, embrace our own struggles, discover our own strengths and gifts and callings. Our identities become mixed up with someone else’s and we then build our little domains and cliques around that person. Then we fall into judging others who aren’t doing things or thinking the way we are. And the deeper tragedy is that we never get down to accepting responsibility for our own unique, precious, and unrepeatable lives.

Paul's first response to this problem in Corinth is negative. He says that neither he, nor Apollos, nor Cephas was crucified for them. Paul expresses gratitude that he baptized no one, except one household he vaguely remembers. Then he goes to the extreme: I didn't come to baptize but to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. And I didn't proclaim it with great homiletic skills or intellectual depth or slick power-point presentations. I had only the knowledge of my own life encountered by the crucified and risen Christ and called into discipleship.

We get derailed by preoccupation with things that don't ultimately matter! It is a shock that Paul belittles baptism this way. We make so much of it, like so many other things that we think are essential. But Paul says all that really matters is the gospel of God's love coming to us in Jesus Christ, calling us into a life of faithfulness to God's new era, God's kingdom. What really matters is how we spend our lives, what we do with these brief, beautiful, unique lives that God has given us. If we squander them by centering ourselves around any human being—the best or the worst—, and if we waste our energies on stuff that doesn't keep us focused on the main thing, we never discover what God intends for our own lives. We never hear the call of Christ sounding within our own lives. We miss the great adventure to which Christ is calling us.

Paul also has a positive response. He tells the community to be in agreement, to be united in the same mind and purpose. Paul calls upon the best that is in them. He doesn't harp on their weaknesses but calls them to touch their deeper identity as Christ's body. For Paul, having the same mind doesn't mean never disagreeing. He doesn't mean we are to think alike. He doesn't mean that we are all supposed to look alike as we follow Christ. Later in his letter (Chapter 12), he says clearly and eloquently that the movement of God's spirit in the community gives birth to diversity, not uniformity. Having the same mind and purpose does not mean that we see things the same way religiously, spiritually, or politically. Our unity is found not in a set of ideas or a spiritual program. Our unity is in the person of the crucified and living Christ, who is a spiritual reality, not a program or position or set of ideas. Our mind is to be the mind of Christ, a servant mind that is full of God (Phil. 2:5-11).

As we each and all together look only to Christ, we find our unity. It is a unity that binds us at the deepest level of our being, beneath the diversity of ways we each respond to Christ and live out our faith in him. For this reason, we can be as different as we can be, and should be so, because we are responding to Christ out of the unique gifts and callings of our lives. For this reason, we can see

things differently, express those differences, learn from one another, while at the same time knowing that we are bound together by God's love in Christ for each and every one of us. This unity in the living Christ gives us a remarkable capacity for loving and caring for one another even when we are so different from one another. We can love one another and receive support from one another without falling into unhealthy dependencies or divisiveness. We can find in ourselves the kind of peace and inner security that comes from following Christ's call in our own lives while not insisting that everyone agree with, join, or even understand us. When we are each looking only to Christ, seeking to hear and respond to his call in our own lives, it all holds together somehow.

The gospel reading provides a good conclusion to all of this. It is the simple, direct, unadorned story of Jesus' calling of his first disciples. They are on the shore mending nets, chatting about this and that, doing their everyday chores, caught up in their everyday preoccupations and concerns. Then Jesus comes into their lives and calls them to follow him. Just like that, they get up and go with him. No explanation. No psychological analysis. No description of Jesus' compelling personality. They just get up and follow. He doesn't tell them where they are going or exactly what they will be doing. The most he says is that he will make them "fish for people." He doesn't elaborate on what exactly that means.

The story is tantalizingly spare. What does it mean that Jesus comes to us, calling us to follow him? He just comes, and we get up and go. What does it mean that there is no content to the call, that he doesn't give us a program or tell us exactly what we're getting into? He just comes, and we get up and follow. What does it mean that these fishermen leave their boats, their nets, and their father and follow Jesus without asking for explanations or assurances? We don't know. They just leave it all, making Jesus the central motivating force in their lives. No other attachments. No other preoccupations. Just following Jesus and learning along the way what that will all mean.

I think this is what Paul is getting at. Others may lead us to Jesus. Others may introduce us to the faith. Others may point the way with their own lives. But it is up to each of us to be there on the shore of our own lives as Jesus comes to us and calls us to follow. He will teach us what we need to let go of and what we are to do. And he will give us others who have also felt that call, making of us a community in which he himself will be present and be known. Through it all, we grow more and more in our love for him and, in him, a deeper love for and peace with one another and ourselves.