

January 23, 2011 / Third Sunday after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

Following 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 Christian community at Corinth. Paul had heard of their quarreling. The word used here (*eris*) is the word from which we get “heresy”. So heresy, it seems, does not mean holding wrong thoughts and ideas, wrong because they disagree with "authorized" teachings. Heresy has to do with fussing and fighting with each other. It is not about what we THINK but how we ACT. And quarreling leads to divisions (*schismata*=“schisms”). This breaks Christ himself into pieces, says Paul, because Christ is embodied in his community. The living Christ is present and at work in his community as it lives out his teachings and spirit, but not when there is quarreling and division.

The problem is, Paul writes, you are saying you belong to this or that person. You’ve attached yourselves to the person who baptized you or otherwise introduced you to the life of faith. You’ve woven your faith around particular persons. Now you have these little groups, each insisting on its own way or truth or rightness, each defending its territory. I read this passage for many years before realizing that Paul was not talking about insidious leaders who were grasping power, gathering their "groupies", and otherwise feeding their own egos. The folks Paul mentions are not bad people. They are outstanding spiritual leaders. Paul himself. Apollos, about whom we read 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 can Christ become divisive? When we make our understanding of Jesus the only one and become defensive about it. When we find ourselves thinking that we have the true understanding of Jesus or of spirituality or whatever. We reduce the dynamic reality of the living Christ to a spiritual, theological, or political program. Paul is saying that we get ourselves and the community of faith in trouble when we attach ourselves to ANY human being or one particular viewpoint as ultimate.

Other people ARE important to us when it comes to the life of faith. However, the main thing is to know for ourselves, within the reality of our own lives, who Jesus is and what he means. It should not be about adopting anyone else's view or experience. We all have known persons who deeply influenced our spiritual lives, either through personal relationships or through our reading and study. We need and are grateful for such teachers and spiritual guides. Paul warns, however, of the danger when we make any human being the central influence of our lives. 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, yet most important. That is when we learn to embrace and live our own lives. Psalm 34 says: *O taste and see that God is good; happy are those who take refuge in God.* The literal meaning of it is *find out for yourself that God is good*, and by extension, *find out for yourself the happiness that comes from taking refuge in God.*

When we elevate persons to a place of central influence in our lives, we risk becoming dependent upon them, failing to live our own unique lives. We are slow to discover our own wisdom, embrace our own struggles, discover our own strengths and gifts and callings. This is why I don't like the saint system, which, by the way, exists not only in the Catholic Church but in all spiritual communities. When we elevate certain persons as spiritual heroes and the like, it may give us some inspiration, but it also distracts us from our own lives, who we are and what we are called to be and to do. We fall into trying to be someone else, someone we are not. We never get down to accepting responsibility for and finding joy in our own unique, precious, and unrepeatable lives.

Paul responds: Was I crucified for you? Were you baptized in MY name? That is Paul's way of pointing away from himself to Jesus, who is the center of the community. Paul says he is glad that he baptized only a few people. His memory is remarkably fuzzy, so it must not have been that important to him. He says as much: I did not come to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, the good news, of Jesus Christ. And I did not proclaim it with great eloquence 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. Paul is talking about the heart of who Jesus was and is, the one who shows us the life-fulfilling way of giving up power, not seizing power, of self-emptying, not self-promotion. It is the way of humility, compassion, service, not building a powerful church or religious movement or throwing the mantle of religion

over the grasping of political power.

Paul makes very little of baptism in this context. Elsewhere, he writes beautifully of the meaning and importance of baptism. Yet here he perceives a danger. Paul says that what really matters is the message of God's love coming to us in Jesus, calling us into a life of faithfulness to God's kingdom, life as God created it to be. What really matters is 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 does not keep us focused on the main thing, we never discover what God intends for our own lives. We never hear the call of Jesus sounding within our own lives. We miss the great adventure and journey to which Jesus is calling us.

Paul pleads with 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 does not harp on their weaknesses or failures, but calls them to touch their deeper identity as Christ's body. Having the same mind does not mean never disagreeing. Paul does not mean we are to think alike or look alike as we follow Jesus. Later in his letter (Chapter 12), he will say clearly and eloquently that the movement of God's spirit in the community gives birth to diversity, not uniformity. Our unity is found not in a set of ideas or a spiritual program. Our unity is in the person of the living Christ, his teachings, his life, his spirit, which point us to our true humanity. Our mind is to be mind of Christ, a self-emptying, servant mind that is full of God (Phil. 2:5-11).

We find our unity as we each and together look to Christ. It is a unity at the deepest level of our being, beneath the diversity of ways we each live out our faith. 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. We can see things differently, express those differences, learn from one another, while at the same time know that we are bound together by God's love for each and every one of us. This deep unity gives us a capacity for loving and caring for one another that transcends our differences. We can love and receive support from one another without falling into unhealthy dependencies. 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 others 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. That is what I think Paul was trying to get the Corinthian community to remember and rediscover--what it really means to be Jesus' community.

The gospel reading provides a good conclusion to all of this. It is the simple, unadorned story of Jesus' calling of his first disciples. They are on the shore mending nets, chatting about this and that, working with their everyday preoccupations and concerns. Jesus comes by 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. No drama. They just get up and follow. He does not 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 that means.

The power of this simple story is that it directs our attention to our own lives. What does it mean that Jesus comes to us, calling us to follow him? 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? 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 get up and go, making Jesus the central focus of their lives. No other attachments. No other preoccupations. Just following Jesus and learning along the way what it will mean. This is why in our community here we offer a way, a practice, that can, if we work with it, keep each of us mindful of and attentive to our relationship with God through discipleship to Jesus. It is not a matter of loyalty to a person, the minister or anyone else. It is not about adopting a fixed set of religious ideas or spiritual truths. It is about working with the things that can keep us centered on and grounded in our relationship with God. It is about our being a community of those who are looking to Jesus and what he will teach us and where he will call and lead us.

I think this is what Paul was getting at. Others may lead us to Jesus. Others may introduce us to the faith. Others may point the way with their own lives. However, it is most important that each of us be there on the shore of our own lives as Jesus comes by 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, knitting us into a community in which he himself is present and known. Through him, we will grow more and more in our awareness and love of God, clearer about who we are and what we are called to do, and find a deeper love for and peace with one another and ourselves.