

January 26, 2014 / 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.*

Paul heard there were problems in the Christian community at Corinth, so he wrote them a letter. He wrote them several letters. There was quarreling (*erides*=quarrels, fightings) and there were divisions (*skismata*=”schisms”). You are breaking Christ into pieces, says Paul, because Christ is embodied in his community. There is a related word that Paul used sometimes in these situations, from which we get the English word “heresy” (*hairesis*). It means a party or a faction, and sometimes it means false or misleading teachings. Heresy does not mean, first of all, having thoughts and ideas that go against “authorized” teachings. Heresy is fussing and fighting, insisting on our own way, as Paul writes later in his letter (1 Cor. 13). Heresy is not what we THINK but how we ACT. The church today needs to learn that how we act as Jesus’ community is more important than what we think. Jesus never talked about having “right beliefs” but living the right kind of life, the life of God’s kingdom, God’s love. Jesus is known in his community when it lives out his teachings and spirit, not when there is the ego stuff that gives rise to quarreling and division and factions.

The problem is, Paul writes, you have made it about belonging to this or that person. You’ve attached yourselves to and formed your little factions around the one who baptized you or otherwise introduced you to the life of faith. I read this passage many years before realizing that Paul was not talking about insidious ego-trippers gathering bands of loyal followers. Paul is talking about worthy and dedicated spiritual leaders. Paul himself. Apollos, who apparently was an able and effective teacher and public speaker (Acts 18:24-28). Cephas, or Peter, the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Christ himself. Wait! How can Christ become divisive? When we make our understanding of Jesus the only one. When we think we have the true understanding of Jesus or 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 in trouble whenever we attach ourselves to ANY human being or viewpoint as ultimate.

Other people ARE important to us when it comes to the life of faith. However, the main thing is to know within the reality of our own lives who Jesus is and what he means. It cannot be about adopting someone else's view or experience. We all have known persons who deeply influenced our spiritual lives, through personal relationships or through our reading and study. We need and are grateful for 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 says this about it: *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 wisdom found in all major spiritual traditions. We need teachers, but 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 is find out for yourself the goodness of God, 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 become dependent upon them and abandon our own lives. We fail to discover our own wisdom and strength, embrace our own struggles, discern our own gifts and callings. This is why I don't like the saint system, which is found in all spiritual communities in one form or another. When we elevate certain persons as spiritual heroes, it may provide 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 try to be someone else, and never get down to accepting responsibility for and finding joy in our own unique and precious lives.

Was PAUL crucified for you? Were you baptized in MY name? Paul points away from himself to Jesus, who points away from himself to God. Paul is glad that he baptized only a few people, and has difficulty remembering who he did baptize! It is not the important thing,

he says. *I did not come to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, the good news, of Jesus Christ.* And I did not use eloquence or great knowledge or slick presentations. I had only my own life in its encounter with Jesus and my own discipleship. Paul is talking about the heart of who Jesus was and is, the one who shows us the 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. It is the way of awakening to our own true humanity and our relationship to God.

Elsewhere, Paul writes beautifully of the meaning and importance of baptism. Yet here he perceives a danger. What matters most is the message of God's love manifest in Jesus, calling us into a life of faithfulness to God's kingdom, life as God created it to be. What matters most is what we do with these lives that God has given us. If we squander them by centering ourselves around any human being—the best or the worst—or waste them fussing and fighting, we never embrace our own lives in God. We miss the great adventure and journey to which Jesus calls us.

Paul pleads with the community to be in agreement, to be united in the same mind and purpose. Having the same mind does not mean that we are to think alike. Later in his letter (Ch. 12), he will say clearly that God's spirit gives birth to a community that is diverse, not uniform. 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 awaken us to our lives in relation to God. We find our unity as we each and together look to Christ. It is a unity at the deepest level of our being. 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 knowing that we are bound together by God's love for each and every one of us. This gives us a capacity for loving and caring for one another that embraces and rejoices in our differences. We can learn to love and support one another without falling into and creating unhealthy dependencies. We can find in ourselves the peace and inner security that comes from following Christ's call in our own lives, so that we no longer insist or expect 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 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, 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 reference to 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." They will find out what it all means as they go, along the way of their discipleship.

To me, the power of this simple story is that it directs our attention to our own lives. What does it mean that Jesus comes to me, calling me 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 their lives into a journey of discipleship. Leaving other attachments. Dropping other preoccupations. Just following Jesus and learning along the way what it means. This is why in our community 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 about loyalty to a person, a minister or a guru or anyone else. It is not about adopting a set of religious ideas or doctrines. It is about working with the things that can keep us centered on and grounded in our relationship with God day by day. 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 unique and precious 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.