

January 22, 2017

TEXT: 1 Corinthians 1:10–18

TITLE: When the Answers are Tough

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This winter at club one sixteen, ELPC's Wednesday evening youth program, we are exploring the theme of "Questions." Last week we played a game in which the group was broken into teams and given the instruction to get to know three things about one another without asking any questions. Quickly the kids realized that the only way to make this happen in the 3 minutes they were allowed was to start to rattle off facts about themselves. It was an effective exercise—as was the reflection that in the "real world" such a strategy would seem awkward at best, arrogant and rude at worst.

As any three year old knows, questions are important. They help us to get to know others better; they help us to show compassion; they help us to call out injustice when we question what seems wrong; questions help us to learn; they help us to get to know ourselves, our world and God, more and more and more.

Now, in spite of my affinity for questions, today's New Testament lessons aren't about asking questions—though there are many questions raised within the Bible—by Moses to God at the burning bush; by Jesus to his disciples; by the Psalmist when he laments asking, "How long, O Lord?" Today's texts, rather are filled with answers: the answer of the disciples whose immediate response to Jesus' call was to drop everything and follow him and the answers of the epistle writer trying to settle conflict in the divided Corinthian church.

We might note that the answers we are shown in today's scripture lessons are pretty tough. As the disciples answer Jesus' call they drop everything they had ever known: their livelihood, their family, their identity, their past. They move away from all that is familiar and comfortable and take a leap of faith to follow this stranger that has appeared by the lakeshore, and, who, without so much as an introduction, summons them to come and follow him. We think this is a beautiful, faithful response. But when we look at our own lives, we admit it is tough. We would have needed some time to settle our affairs, convince our spouse to come along, get money out of savings, put on more comfortable shoes, and give our two weeks' notice. Their response is a high water mark, but for us, it is *aspirational*. They are *the* disciples. We are just disciples.

Then we turn to Paul, whose message in light of our national climate might be the one we might find even more difficult. In the face of conflict, Paul admonishes the Corinthians to get along, to avoid division at a time when it would be easiest to scatter

and hunker down with like-minded folks in different camps. He challenges the church to stick together, to prioritize their unity rather than distinguishing themselves by their opinions or by their teachers. He instructs them to *agree* at a time when their community is riddled with disagreement. He doesn't give them instructions on conflict resolution. He doesn't show up and try to mediate the issues. *Agree* he instructs. Just do it.

Paul can see that their disagreement is causing splinters. These splinters are sending ripples across the early church. This diverse community held together by a common belief in Christ is earning a reputation for their squabbles. Their disagreement is starting to define them—not the common faith they proclaim. They need to pull it together, he tells them, and remember who they are and whose they are.

What might this mean for us? If we each pulled out our phones and scrolled through our Facebook feeds we would instantly find “friends” with whom we disagree. There may be some who we have loved dearly—with whom we played soccer in high school or for whom we threw a baby shower a decade ago. But when we read their posts—which might be particularly political during this season—the hairs on our neck stand up. We ask ourselves: *How could THIS be our FRIEND?* How can we trust someone who sees things so differently? How can we relate to someone who stands on principles with which we so strongly disagree? How can we identify with someone who pushed a different button in a voting booth in November and doesn't see the world like we do? Did we misjudge them? Did they change? Did WE change? And then we ask: where do we go from here?

Paul challenges us with a next step. Try to agree. Find some common ground. Don't let differences divide you. Stick together. Find agreement. Ugh. We ask: How do we do this? *How can we, with integrity, find a way to agree when we, frankly, so strongly disagree?*

Mediator and negotiation advisor William Ury talks of an approach he thinks is fundamental to reconciliation. Having been involved in conflicts from boardrooms to the borders of Yugoslavia, Chechnya and all nations in the Middle East he has ideas worth listening to.

Ury shares the story of a tactic he learned from the San Bushman in South Africa. This is a community of

“...hunters and gatherers...(in which) all the men have these poison arrows that they use for hunting—absolutely fatal. So how do they deal with their differences? Well, what I learned is, whenever tempers rise in those

communities, someone goes and hides the poison arrows out in the bush, and then everyone sits around in a circle...and they sit and they talk and they talk. It may take two days, three days, four days, but they don't rest until they find a resolution or better yet—a reconciliation. And if tempers are still too high, then they send someone off to visit some relatives, as a cooling-off period.”¹

So what can we do, when we don't have time to sit in a circle for days to resolve a conflict. Well, he says:

(The) system that kept us alive to this point, given our human tendencies (is one) I call "the third side." Because if you think about it, normally when we think of conflict, when we describe it, there's always two sides—it's Arabs versus Israelis, labor versus management, husband versus wife, Republicans versus Democrats. But what we don't often see is that there's always a third side, and the third side of the conflict is us, it's the surrounding community, it's the friends, the allies, the family members, the neighbors. And we can play an incredibly constructive role.

Perhaps the most fundamental way in which the third side can help is to remind the parties of what's really at stake. For the sake of the kids, for the sake of the family, for the sake of the community, for the sake of the future, let's stop fighting for a moment and start talking.²

Paul is trying to offer the Corinthians the perspective of the third side. He's trying to give them a reason to stop fighting and start talking. He's trying to call them away from the individualism that is claiming their hearts and point them towards the something bigger of which they are a part *for the sake of the Gospel*.

The root of this third side is Christ. He argues that we can find our answer of yes to each other in Christ's yes to us. The cross of Christ changes things. Through it we have won a unity not of our own making. Through the cross we have inherited a shared identity and a shared call. Any power we have, Paul teaches, comes to us from Christ—not from our own financial reserves or mastery of rhetoric; not from our good looks or alliances. Our strength comes from knowing who we are and whose we are. It is Christ's redemptive work on behalf of all of creation that should be our focus. It is upon this belief that we should invest our hope, claim our identity, and proclaim the good news of our shared salvation.

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/william_ury/transcript?language=en

² *ibid.*

And as much as I disagree with Paul from time to time, I have to say that I like where he is going with this. His challenge and charge to the Corinthians is valuable wisdom for us today too. He calls us to community—a community for which we have been created—and reminds us that we are, in spite of and even because of our differences, a part of something bigger. This third side can generate another option—one that can lead toward reconciliation and life-changing love.

Our unity, however, is not to be self-gratuitous, misaligned or mis-focused. Our yes should always affirm Christ's yes. It must be grounded in Christ's message and his witness: of welcome, hospitality, healing, mercy, grace, forgiveness, repentance, wholeness and love.

If we claim unity because of *who* we follow, as Paul suggests, we must recognize that this unity cannot stand if we move away from Christ's gospel. Our unity is grounded in the justice for which Jesus strove, the welcome he showed to outcasts, the many ways in which he said "yes" to and stood with and for women, the disabled, the foreigner and those who were sexually marginalized. We can't forget that he fed those who were hungry. He touched those who were unclean. He ate with former criminals. (If you want Scripture references, I'd be happy to provide you with them!)

This is the community to which we are called. This is the good news on which we are to hang our hats each day. We are a part of something bigger than ourselves: a community grounded in reconciliation, justice and steadfast love.

May we find the courage to say yes to Christ's call and to the community into which we have been formed. May we dare to say boldly:

Yes, I will follow.

Yes, I will love you even when we don't agree.

Yes, I will honor and defend your full humanity.

Yes, I will stand in solidarity with those who are different from me—especially when our differences make you vulnerable, and when my choice to stand with you makes me more vulnerable.

Yes, today and every day, I will choose to love.