

## *Fretting and Squabbling*

**1 Corinthians 1:10-18** Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

## *Fretting and Squabbling*

As we look at today's scripture lesson, there are two things in this text that are thought provoking. In the middle of Paul's emotional and powerfully presented thoughts about church division and squabbling, he brings up the subject of baptism. And he says some rather odd things about baptism. We place a lot of importance on baptism, but over the years we may well have developed some distorted views of this sacrament. When I was a child, there was always an invitational hymn right after the sermon. The minister would invite those who had not accepted Jesus as their Savior to come forward, confess their sin, declare that they accepted Jesus, and be baptized. If no one came forward during the first two verses, the minister might have us hum the song softly while he reminded everybody that life was uncertain, there are no guarantees, and we might get hit by a bus on the way home. It would be terrible to spend the afterlife burning in hell just because we hesitated to be baptized. So, many of us came to think of baptism as sort of a switch, a switch that we flipped to go from darkness to light, from being damned to being saved, a switch that had to be switched to be assured entry into heaven. It was an urgent thing, because until you were baptized, you were playing Russian roulette with your life - who knew when that bus might hit you.

This is a good example of how what you believe can affect what you do. In some Christian traditions, there's a strong belief that baptism is absolutely critical - and so newborn babies are baptized just as soon as possible, especially if they seem to have any health issues. When my grandson Andrew was born with a huge brain tumor, his fraternal grandmother fretted terribly about making sure he was baptized before the surgery to remove the tumor. So, an Episcopal priest and I baptized Andrew there in the neonatal intensive care unit. Since that grandmother understood baptism to be a sort of switch, like a switch in the railroad tracks that switches a train from the track to eternal torment to the track to eternal bliss, the baptism of her grandson was of great pastoral comfort to her.

In the light of that kind of belief about baptism, Paul's words here seem strange and jarring. "I thank God that I baptized none of you . . ." he begins. Then, he has a hard time remembering the few people who he did baptize. And on top of that, Paul says, "Christ didn't send me to baptize. He sent me to proclaim the good news." This doesn't quite fit with the understanding that baptism is of ultimate and immediate importance. Paul was sent to teach, but not to baptize? Was he to say, in effect, "Here's the great news, the gospel. You better hope someone comes along to baptize you before you die, but it's not my job." That doesn't make any sense, of course. Jesus told his disciples to "Love one another as I have loved you." There's no "Love one another as I have loved you" in preaching the path, but telling people it's not your job to open the gate!

What would Jesus do? Or more precisely, what did Jesus do? Who did Jesus baptize? There is not a single account in the New Testament of Jesus baptizing anyone. In fact, in the gospel according to John, in the fourth chapter, we read <sup>NRS</sup> **John 4:1-3** "Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had

heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John" <sup>2</sup> -- although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized-- <sup>3</sup> he left Judea and started back to Galilee." Did you catch that? Jesus didn't baptize! His disciples did. At this point we can spin off into useless speculation about, "Well, who did baptize the disciples? Rather than do that, let's just take note that neither Jesus nor Paul seemed to act like baptism was critically urgent – a matter of eternal life or death. And, in the sixth chapter of Romans and in the tenth chapter of First Corinthians, Paul goes to some length to point out that baptism isn't a guarantee of our righteous behavior or our eternal safety. He speaks about how we can ignore our baptism and put God's grace to the test.

This isn't to say that baptism isn't important. It is very important. It's a sacrament of the new covenant. A sacrament is a sacred moment, a holy act. It has been called a "visible sign of an invisible grace." (Augustine) It has been described as a "sign and seal" of God's promise of salvation. (Calvin) In the action of the sacrament, we enact what we believe. It's a sign of our faith. Words are powerful, but insufficient. Words can express what we feel, but sometimes it takes music to express our feelings completely. You can say that you understand poverty, but unless you've been dirt poor at sometime in your life, you don't fully know what poverty feels like. Sacraments are acts in which our actions model and act out what we believe. At the Lord's Table we enact our understanding that Jesus loved all kinds of people; that he expressed this many times by eating with them. We enact our belief that Jesus nourishes us with his teaching and his love. We remember how he willingly sacrificed his life for others, how his body was broken and his blood was shed so that others might live and live fully. When the bread of communion is fresh and warm, we experience that metaphor in scripture, "O taste and see that the Lord is good." (Psalm 34:8)

In the old covenant, circumcision was the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants. Just as the Hebrews marked their male babies with the sign that they were members of God's people, so we baptize our children as a sign that they are part of the people of God. We remember that Jesus said to let the children come to him. Adults who were not raised in the faith, but who hear God's claim on their lives, who hear the call to follow Jesus, respond not only in their mind and in their heart, but also in the act of baptism. It's the outward act of the grace they feel in their heart. It's the action that proclaims what already exists, that God loves them and that they are beginning the journey of faith.

If we think about it for a moment, we understand the concept of signs and seals. It wasn't so long ago that when a business agreement was reached, the parties "shook hands on it." It was a sign of agreement. It "sealed the deal." Way back in the early days of rock and roll, there was a song of teenage love that was "sealed with a kiss." That made perfect sense to us. You might talk on the phone for hours. You might go to the movie and share a milkshake with two straws. You might spend all kinds of time together, signs of warmth and affection, but until you kissed, it really wasn't a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. A kiss sealed the relationship – it was the action that declared what you knew you already felt. In a wedding ceremony, words are said, vows are taken, love is declared. Still, it's the kiss at the end of the ceremony that enacts the relationship that's been proclaimed. It's the seal, if you will. And, in like manner, baptism is the action, the outward sign, the seal on the deal as we display our acceptance of the call to journey down the path of faith.

In today's passage from the first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul is highly concerned about the squabbling that is taking place. He reminds them of their baptism. Their baptism was a sign and seal of their relationship to Christ. Keep your eyes on the goal, Paul seems to say. Never forget that this is about following Jesus. Don't let yourself be distracted from that central focus.

Corinth was a bustling seaport. There were people from all over the Mediterranean who worked and lived there. The church in Corinth was drawn from this hodge-podge of humanity, a stew of various religious and ethnic backgrounds, rich and poor, educated and illiterate. Today, we would say that the church in Corinth was characterized by its diversity. So long as there is a common goal, a central focus that unifies, all of that diversity adds strength to the community. But when that central goal is lost, fractures develop quickly. And so Paul calls on the Christians in Corinth to recall their baptism and their relationship with Christ.

Here in a few minutes we will go break bread together. Last February things looked rather bleak and we were all concerned about how the future might unfold for this congregation. Today there will be good news and reason to celebrate. That's wonderful! I urge you to continue to maintain the dedication, the effort, and the focus that we had as God's community last year. Too often, the greatest threat to a community is not the external threat, but the internal drift, the loss of common purpose, the squabbling that can arise. Remember your baptism. Remember to keep your eye on Christ. Remember that we are all on this journey together, helping each other along the path of faith, all of us pointed in the same direction toward an ever deeper and stronger relationship with Jesus – a journey that was proclaimed and begun with our baptism. Amen.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Romans 6:1-14** What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?<sup>2</sup> By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?<sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?<sup>4</sup> Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.<sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.<sup>6</sup> We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.<sup>7</sup> For whoever has died is freed from sin.<sup>8</sup> But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.<sup>9</sup> We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.<sup>10</sup> The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.<sup>11</sup> So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.<sup>13</sup> No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness.<sup>14</sup> For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

<sup>NRS</sup> **1 Corinthians 10:1-13** I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea,<sup>2</sup> and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,<sup>3</sup> and all ate the same spiritual food,<sup>4</sup> and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.<sup>6</sup> Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did.<sup>7</sup> Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play."<sup>8</sup> We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day.<sup>9</sup> We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents.<sup>10</sup> And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.<sup>11</sup> These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.<sup>12</sup> So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.<sup>13</sup> No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

**Rom 4:11-16** <sup>NRS</sup><sup>11</sup> He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them,<sup>12</sup> and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.<sup>13</sup> For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.<sup>14</sup> If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.<sup>15</sup> For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.<sup>16</sup> For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us,