

“Divided Christ”
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I Corinthians 1:10-18

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There are so many Christmas Parties and events crammed into December, that some groups wait and have their parties in January. In 2011, our church staff party was at the Pastor Graham West’s home on Sunday, January 9th at 4pm. My husband Bob’s work party was the following Saturday evening, January 15 at 7:30pm. Dates and times chosen in early December, seemed like they would be in the quieter season of winter, when life is a bit slower and we could relax. As it turned out, both parties ended up during Green Bay Packer Playoff games.

I realize the risk I am about to take as I say this, but I am not a football fan. Please don’t start throwing tomatoes at me yet. I respect anyone else’s right to be a football fan, within reason...I have a great sermon, that I preached when I was younger and more daring, which includes a Packer Fan who broke all ten commandments through his obsession with the game, but I won’t go there today.

The West’s were very gracious and we had a choice according to what room we were in, if we wanted to watch the football game or not. Either way, score updates came via messengers from the other room and via cell phone reports from outside locations. In the end we all went to the TV to watch a very exciting finish to the game. The energy in the room was electric and you just knew the Packers were the right team to win!

The following week I was informed that the dining apparel approved for the United Ag Services annual Christmas party was Packer colors, and that the advertised evening entertainment had been replaced by the set up of four TVs, one a big screen and a projection system for one wall, so no matter where you sat in the banquet room you could see a screen.

Here’s the thing: I wore a very generic black outfit, as I don’t possess or need Packer colors in my life. But in walks someone in a Viking Brett Farve jersey. As it turned out he was one of the top managers at the party, so he didn’t get too much grief, but he did make his statement. Seeing him made me realize that I don’t have to be right, but I do have to be me.

Now, if I have gotten your football adrenaline all worked up, let’s come back to this present reality for a bit. Jesus isn’t a sport and what we do here is not a game. But it can be related to the scriptures as we hear the rivalry that Paul is addressing in this letter, of the different groups of Christians all claiming that they have the best understanding of Christ.

Paul writes: ‘...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?’

Christianity was a new thing. It was facing an uphill battle of change and acceptance amongst the Roman government’s authority and rule and the ancient Hebrew understanding of God. Yet in a very short while it already had more than one understanding of who Christ was for the people. As the Apostles shared their ‘first hand reports’ of Christ, each from their own perspective; and then their followers, including the newly converted Paul began to share their perspectives of what they were experiencing through the love of Christ, it was coming up some different.

In a time when Jesus had even warned them of false prophets, everyone had to be careful who they believed. But who was right? Paul reminds the Corinthians that he isn’t the one who was sent by God to save them. He is ever pointing away from himself to Christ.

The Christian Church, for 2000 years, throughout history has wrestled with and split in many directions because we don't all understand Christ in the same way. It is fascinating to follow the map of divisions within the church through the centuries, all because we don't all think alike. I would suggest to you that following Paul's example of pointing away from yourself to Christ for answers is a good test of how you are doing in your understanding.

The church speaks about a personal relationship with Christ. It is obtained by spending time in the scriptures (you may notice I didn't say understanding it all), spending time alone with God and together with others in Christian Community and recognizing God working through Christ in your life.

In football every week there are winners and losers. But in our Christianity it is not a battle, it is not a competition. Football would be no fun if it weren't divided into teams. But every week some fans are disappointed and some elated as they count down to the Super Bowl and then when their team is out they look forward to the next season in just a few more months, with a new hope.

There are a variety of denominations within the Christian beliefs. None have it all right, though some may think they do. In fact, because we are all unique and different, any time you think you have it all figured out and right, best to check again. I believe only one person in history had it all right, and he was only half human, the other half divine, and he was crucified on a cross for having the right beliefs.

Why would God allow so many denominations within Christianity? William Cowper and English poet from the 18th century wrote this: "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform. He plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm." God's hand is visible in all of creation, but there is much there we don't understand...

Isn't it mysterious and awesome to think that with the snow we receive, even in a slow year, and have piled outside our doors, that each snowflake is unique? Wait! This is the latest report: "A snowflake is generally considered a uniquely shaped piece of falling snow, a crystalline form of water ice. However, the concept that no two snowflakes are alike is incorrect: it is entirely possible, but unlikely, that a pair of snowflakes may be visually identical if their environments were similar enough, either because they grew very near one another, or simply by chance. The American Meteorological Society has reported that matching snow crystals were discovered by Nancy Knight of the National Center for Atmospheric Research. The crystals were not flakes in the usual sense but rather hollow hexagonal prisms. "

So honestly, it is unlikely. Just as it is unlikely that no matter how alike two people may be in looks or environments, even as close as identical twins, they will not be the same, for unlike snowflakes we are capable of thinking for ourselves and choosing what we will believe in our lives. We each are uniquely individual. So why would we reason that we would all think exactly alike?

If we did all think exactly alike, we would all drive the same car – that is a lot of Pink Cadillacs to have to look at. If we did all think alike, I would have nothing to share with you, and you would have nothing to share with me. William Cowper also wrote "Variety's the very spice of life, That gives it all its flavor"

We all choose our teams, or no team as my case may be. We choose according to our understandings of life. We choose what we perceive to be 'right' in our knowledge of something, according to the understanding we have from our own tradition, our own experiences in life, our own hearing of scripture, and how we have reasoned it all out. As everyone is unique in each of these things, each will land in a unique place from us.

Just as you may pick a football team according to where you grew up. Your denomination may have come from your family of origin. As we move through life some of those choices change, as we become our own

persons. Christ came to help us build our relationship with our Creator and with each other, in the midst of knowing that we are all thinking in differing directions. Christ came to bring us together, let us try not to divide Christ.

This week is the week of Prayer for Christian Unity. When I was the Associate Pastor in Eau Claire, I attended the monthly Ecumenical clergy lunch. Within it was an open invitation to any clergy or church leaders. I sat down next to the pastor from Unity Center, who was sitting next to a Lutheran Pastor, who was sitting next to a Baptist pastor and so on around the table. We were discussing the Service of Christian Unity which will be the next evening at the Presbyterian Church at 7p..

We were winding down that conversation when one of the leaders from the Islamic Society of Northern Wisconsin, in Altoona, who sometimes join our Ecumenical group, sat down to my right. He ordered the same salad as two others at the table and was welcomed as one of us at a table of openness and people seeking new understandings. I had placed my order of service and notes for the Christian Unity worship service next to my plate and he asked to read them. He took a length of time to consider our plans on the paper, and then replaced them by my plate. He didn't comment, he didn't have to, and it was all comfortable and OK.

John Wesley said: "We may not all believe alike, but we can all love alike." I was raised on Wesley, in the Methodist and then the United Methodist Church. It is a part of who I am. I agree with what this denomination is about – reaching beyond ourselves for the good of others. Along with you I want to be a part of 'a Christian community reaching out to others with Open Hearts, Open Minds and Open Doors' as our Mission Statement says. Even so, I know that there are others, many in fact who receive Christ in another way.

We are blessed as United Methodists when we can live our motto "Open hearts, open minds, open doors." Not all denominations feel they can proclaim that. We can't always live up to it. Even those words we each define differently... but when we can, we open ourselves to Christ and a better understanding of what it means to be a Christian.

I do invite you to spend some time this week praying for Christian Unity. We can only know God better through opening ourselves to understanding each other. We don't have to all agree, but in listening to each other we may find ourselves in a new place than were before. The Holy Spirit continues to help us grow in our faith and understanding when we open ourselves to all that God has for us.

I know that you and you and you are strong enough in who you are to open yourself to a new understanding and still remain a Christ follower on the journey. That is why I am willing to send each one of you out into the community to serve alongside Lutherans and Catholics and other Christians at the Food Shelf, Salvation Army and all of the other places you do Christ's work. We join with other Christians from this community in celebrating what we have in common, along with recognizing where some of our misunderstandings still lay.

I feel especially safe sending you out into the Christian fray, as I feel our message of openness is a good, United Methodist message...oops, you see how easily we get twisted into thinking our way is the only way. For us it may be the best way, but there are other ways to Christ. Other people may know and need other ways. Can we be open to that?

I know that the Packers won't be playing in the Super Bowl on Feb 3. That wouldn't really intrigue me to watch anyway. Yet, I will watch - because I want to be in the midst of the excitement and joy of the people I care about when they party – it is part of the journey together; and because Christ has said "Where two or three are gathered I am there in the midst"; and even if you aren't a football fan, the best TV Commercials of the year will be previewed and are worth my watching during that game, ... We all have our reasoning...