

*You've Got Mail: A Journey Through A Few of Paul's Letters*  
**CONNECTED – A Letter to the Church in Corinth**  
**Message for August 4, 2019**  
**North East United Methodist Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Drew M. Christian**

The May 1987 edition of National Geographic included a feature about the arctic wolf. Author L. David Mech described how a seven-member pack had targeted several musk-oxen calves who were guarded by eleven adults...



As the wolves approached their quarry, the musk-oxen bunched in an impenetrable semicircle, their deadly rear hooves facing out...



and the calves...



...remained safe during a long standoff with the enemy...

But then a single ox broke rank, and the herd scattered. A skirmish ensued, and the adults finally fled in panic, leaving the calves to the mercy of the predators.



Not a single calf survived.

Paul warned the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 that after his departure wolves would come, not sparing the flock. Wolves continue to attack the church today but Paul wanted the church to understand, what the musk-oxen forgot...wolves cannot penetrate and destroy the church when unity is maintained. When believers break ranks, they provide easy prey.

Unity is so important to the church that Jesus died for, that before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus' last prayer was for us to live in unity. John 17: 20-22 reads, ***“I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me because of their testimony. My prayer for all of them is that they will be one, just as you and I are one, Father – that just as you are in me and I am in you, so they will be in us, and the world will believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are...”***

Unfortunately, as **George MacDonald** writes, **“Division has done more to hide Christ from the view of men than all the infidelity that has ever been spoken.”**

When people outside these walls see the church full of disunity, gossip, backbiting, fighting, complaining, and division...they turn away and fail to hear the message of hope that is being preached.

After spending eighteen months in Corinth during his second missionary journey, Paul hears that factions were rising up in the church in that city, each group following a different leader that thought the way they did. They were letting their opposing viewpoints separate them and hurt the church rather than working together, keeping their eyes on the Head, Jesus Christ. In his letter to the church in Corinth, written around 55 AD, Paul addresses several things that are necessary for the Christian church to stay connected, to stay unified.

First, **We must take a hard look in the mirror.**



Many times in Acts, where there is disunity in the early church, there is a group of people that are unwilling to take a hard look in the mirror and discover that their envy and jealousy, their attitudes and personal desires, are causing them to miss, and to cause others to miss, the message

of hope being offered. As Rick Warren writes, *“Peace always has a price tag. Sometimes it costs our pride; it often costs our self-centeredness.”*

Paul addresses this throughout his letter to the Corinthians. In I Corinthians 1: 26-31 (NLT) – *“Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world’s eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world; things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God. God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God; he made us pure and holy, and he freed us from sin. Therefore, as the Scriptures say, “If you want to boast, boast only about the LORD.”*

Every day I am reminded of my sinful nature...every day I am thankful for God’s grace...God has taken ordinary people like you and I...foolish in our actions and pursuits...sinful creatures...men and women who constantly mess up...and uses us to bring truth to the world, to replace the *“wisdom of this world.”* Why? Paul says, *“That no flesh should glory in His presence.”* So no one can boast of his or her achievements, his or her ministry and accomplishments...Salvation is from Christ and Christ alone...all that is wise comes from above...

Paul reiterates this theme in I Corinthians 4: 1-7 [NLT] – *“So look at Apollos and me as mere servants of Christ who have been put in charge of explaining God’s mysteries. Now, a person who is put in charge as a manager must be faithful. As for me, it matters very little how I might be evaluated by you or by any human authority. I don’t even trust my own judgment on this point. My conscience is clear, but that doesn’t prove I’m right. It is the Lord himself who will examine me and decide. So don’t make judgments about anyone ahead of time—before the Lord returns. For he will bring our darkest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. Then God will give to each one whatever praise is due. Dear brothers and sisters, I have used Apollos and myself to illustrate what I’ve been saying. If you pay attention to what I have quoted from the Scriptures, you won’t be proud of one of your leaders at the expense of another. For what gives you the right to make such a judgment? What do you have that God hasn’t given you? And if everything you have is from God, why boast as though it were not a gift?”*

Thus, if everything we have is from God, we cannot judge one another, causing division, *“For ‘who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?’”* Our faith, our salvation, our gifts, were given us by God; thus, we cannot *“boast”* as if it is us...we cannot judge another as weaker or ourselves as stronger...we did not earn what we have on our own strength.

Secondly, **We must focus, not on the issues, but on Jesus Christ.**



Paul writes in I Corinthians 3: 1-4 [NLT] – ***“Dear brothers and sisters, when I was with you I couldn’t talk to you as I would to spiritual people. I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in the Christian life. I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren’t ready for anything stronger. And you still aren’t ready, for you are still controlled by your sinful nature. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other. Doesn’t that prove you are controlled by your sinful nature? Aren’t you living like people of the world? When one of you says, “I am a follower of Paul,” and another says, “I follow Apollos,” aren’t you acting just like people of the world?”***

Paul is addressing the difference between carnal and spiritual Christians. Both are in the church but one is focused on worldly things and one is focused on Christ.

The example Paul gives of the carnal Christian is one who builds on the foundation of Christ “*envy, strife, and divisions.*” The carnal Christian is one who follows human leaders rather than God’s Word. Paul asks, “*are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?*”

The spiritual Christian is focused not on his or her personal desires or worldly things, but on God’s Word and instruction, on Jesus Christ.

Living in a fallen world, you and I fluctuate between the two...so in every situation we must ask, “Which role am I playing?” Am I focused on Christ? Do I have scripture to support my actions? And when we mess up, we need to seek forgiveness and change our behavior.

When we look and focus on Christ it changes the way we act, the way we think, and helps us remember what is truly important to God. Christ holds us together.

Paul challenges the Corinthians to “*speak the same thing,*” to allow for “*no divisions,*” and to “*be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.*” Paul challenges them to give up control, to focus on Christ and His Word, and to recognize, when one does disagree with a brother or sister there is something that must overshadow the disagreement – I Corinthians 13: 1-3 [NLT] – ***“If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn’t love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God’s secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn’t love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn’t love others, I would have gained nothing.”***

Thirdly, **We must recognize that in Christ we are one people.**



Paul writes in I Corinthians 10: 15-17 [NLT] – ***“You are reasonable people. Decide for yourselves if what I am saying is true. When we bless the cup at the Lord’s Table, aren’t we sharing in the blood of Christ? And when we break the bread, aren’t we sharing in the body of Christ? And though we are many, we all eat from one loaf of bread, showing that we are one body.”***

Christ is the uniting factor. Christ is that which connects us. As the church sings, *“Gentile or Jew, servant or free, woman or man, no more...One bread, One body.”*

I Corinthians 12: 12-13 [The Message] - ***“You can easily enough see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts—limbs, organs, cells—but no matter how many parts you can name, you’re still one body. It’s exactly the same with Christ. By means of his one Spirit, we all said good-bye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which he has the final say in everything. (This is what we proclaimed in word and action when we were baptized.) Each of us is now a part of his resurrection body, refreshed and sustained at one fountain—his Spirit—where we all come to drink. The old labels we once used to identify ourselves—labels like Jew or Greek, slave or free—are no longer useful. We need something larger, more comprehensive.”***

I Corinthians 12: 27 [The Message] – ***“You are Christ’s body—that’s who you are! You must never forget this. Only as you accept your part of that body does your “part” mean anything.”***

It is our faith that unites us. And as we take our place in Christ’s body, our job is to discover the role that we are called to play, the part in the body that will bring meaning and purpose to our lives. Our identity is in Christ...the fact that we are a part of His body...one connected with many...drawn together by the Spirit of God. The prophet Malachi put it this way, ***“Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?”*** (2:10).

Lastly, **We must not be a stumbling block to the Gospel.**



Are we a stumbling block or a stepping stone for others? In the church? In the community?

Pope John XXIII said, “It would scarcely be necessary to expound doctrine if our lives were radiant enough. **If we behaved like true Christians, there would be no pagans.**”

Paul writes in I Corinthians 9:22 [NIV] – ***“I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.”***

Thus, even if we might not believe there is anything wrong with our actions or that our behavior is justified, if it affects our witness in the community and discourages new believers in the church, if it, as Paul writes in I Corinthians 8:9, *“makes my brother stumble,”* we should not do it. Instead, we become, I Corinthians 9:19, *“a servant to all, that [we] might win more.”*

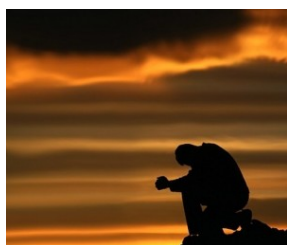
Remember, it all starts with us...Aldous Huxley discovered, *“I wanted to change the world. But I have found that the only thing one can be sure of changing is oneself.”*

As Psychologist, John M. Grohol writes, *“One of life’s hardest lessons to learn is that you can only change yourself. Some people spend inordinate amounts of time and energy upset, angry, or frustrated by other people’s thoughts and behaviors. But to what end? You can rail against the rain or feel sanguine about the snow, but there’s not a whole lot you can do about it. Why should we, by default, believe we can change another person’s — an independent, thinking self just like us — behaviors and thoughts with just a few choice words? If you think about it for a minute, it sounds kind of ridiculous...**So save yourself some frustration today and try to learn to stop trying to change others. Focus instead on changing your own faults and you may find yourself living a happier and more peaceful life.**”*

When we leave here, every Sunday, it is a time for introspection...



...it is a time to dig deep and ask God to reveal to us the next step in our walk of faith... We must start with us...Paul wants the Christians in Corinth and each of us, the Christians at North East United Methodist Church in North East, Maryland, to ask some important questions...



1. **Am I willing to look in the mirror** and deal with my issues, shortcomings, sin?

2. **Am I willing to stop focusing on the issues and instead focus on Christ**, looking to God's Word for guidance?
3. **Do I recognize that I am only a part of the "body of Christ,"** that together in Christ I am joined with others and am no longer my own?
4. **Am I a stumbling block to others or a stepping stone...** am I hurting my church's witness in the community or am I, through my actions and speech, attracting others to Christ?

As Paul writes in Romans 15:5-6, may we pray, *"May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help [us] live in complete harmony with each other – each with the attitude of Christ Jesus toward the other. Then all of [us] can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."* AMEN.