

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, January 22, 2017
Marg McGugan
I Corinthians 1:10-18; Psalm 27; Matthew 4:12-23
“In God is our trust”

The bleak mid-winter - the middle of January - we experience every form of precipitation possible. It is a dismal time for some and for others it is a time of joy. Some hate winter and will do anything to get away from it, while others love winter and thrive to get out there and enjoy the elements. We are a people of the northern hemisphere, who walk in darkness and shadows only to be guided by the morning star. We await the warmth and beauty of spring; but, we must first endure the time between Christmas and Lent. A time between celebrations. Metaphorically, we are traveling from Bethlehem up to Jerusalem, where God graced the earth.

In the Gospels we experience the appearance of God rhetorically through the story of the Magi, the baptism of Jesus and the water turned into wine at Cana. Three moments when Christ is revealed as the ‘awaited Messiah’. As we reflect, ponder and celebrate the gospel of Jesus Christ through these passages, we cannot help but wonder how the church flourished to present day. Which led me to the office of a true Scotsman - Andrew Reid - who after listening and interpreting my disparity of thoughts, retrieved a university book from his personal library, flipped it open, and folded back a page to reveal a timeline of the evolution of the Churches of Scotland from the Reformation (1560) to the displacement of believers (1950). The timeline looked like something I would see on a building plan showing the layout of electrical circuits. It was too neat, too tidy to represent 400 years of convoluted history of hate, mistrust and bloodshed based on religious differences. We are talking about change. We are talking about theologies. We are talking about Scottish temperaments. But somehow, the Church of Scotland arrived to ‘disagree agreeably’. God must have had a hand in it somewhere because, after all those years of long-winded arguments, the Church of Scotland recognizes God in its slogan ‘*nec tamen consumebatur*’

Latin for---‘Yet, it was not consumed’ an allusion to Exodus 3:2 when God was speaking to Moses out of a burning bush.

This ‘disagree agreeably’ ‘is the message Paul is writing about in our text - to seek ways to be united in faith to those with whom we disagree.

Paul left the church in Corinth in good hands after spending 18 months building it up, trusting that his teachings of Jesus’ life would withstand any controversies. But that was not to be, as we learn that Paul receives news from a delegation of Chloe’s people---slaves or dependant workers who were owned or hired by Chloe, a wealthy woman of social status - about the internal discord in the Corinthian congregation. Paul replies back addressing the problems, including animosity, litigation, food contamination, and class divisions at the communal meal. Paul gives us an unparalleled though hardly neutral picture of the life of the early church. He appealed to the young church to get along with one another....focus on the teachings of Christ. The discord of believers was split among 4 different ardent parties; Paul; Apollos; Cephas and Christ. Each party had its own agenda to build the church whether teaching about Jesus, or Greek philosophy or the Laws of the Torah. A division was presenting itself, pulling peoples’ beliefs one way and then another - pulling people away from the essence of Jesus. People got so proud of their objectives that they started to think of themselves as being ‘of Christ’ while those people outside their line of thinking were not ‘of Christ’. It became a struggle of knowing who was in and who was out. Whose mandate was right?

Sometimes we use God to strengthen our own mandate without realizing it. Let me give you an example.

I came across an American quarter in my wallet the other day. Flipping it over in my hand, I remembered there was a profound saying on the money ‘In God We Trust’. I wanted to understand how this saying got stamped on their currency which led me to Wikipedia and it gave me an answer that surprised me. In 1861 at the beginning of the Civil War, the annual report of national finances was being submitted to the Congress and the Rev. M.R.

Watkinson, a minister from a northern state church, wrote a letter to the Treasury Department petitioning that a statement recognizing 'Almighty God' should appear 'in some form on our coins' in order to 'relieve us from the embarrassment of heathenism'. Part of the motivation to recognize God was to declare that God was on the Union side of the Civil War. The 'trust of the people in God' slogan seems to have had a double meaning and one we would not think possible.

The challenge of our text in I Corinthians is how the church can remain true to the gospel of Christ even when disagreements about doctrines and practices present themselves. As Paul demonstrates in the text, there is nothing wrong with following Paul, or Peter or Apollos even if their doctrines differ. We all have different thoughts of who God is and how God plays a role in our lives. God appears when we least expect him.

As we listen to Matthew's account of God's role as seen on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, we encounter fishermen who leave their nets behind and follow Jesus. It appears that we are at the beginning of Jesus' ministry as he settles in Galilee near Capernaum. He has learned that John the Baptizer has been imprisoned and awaits trial. There is now an urgency to build the sovereign reign of God and Jesus has much teaching to do. As Jesus walks along the Sea of Galilee, he welcomes two brothers to 'follow me'. As the three men journey on their way, they come across two more brothers, James and John. These brothers unconsciously, are face to face with the Lamb of God and have taken up their new roles quickly preaching about Jesus, proclaiming the message of the Kingdom and authenticating or substantiating Jesus' claims by healing the outcasts, the vulnerable and the sick. There was no distinction of who could come to Jesus nor who could follow. All are welcomed. 'Come follow' seems a pretty simple thing to do. It appears all can do it, or make an effort to come. There is no timeline, no guidelines, and no scholastic requirements----just walk with me. Leave behind your baggage of contempt, and pride and immorality. For you will learn new ways of inner joy and peace and harmony that comes with being right with God. You will have opportunities never thought possible. Opportunities to say and do things as God would have you say and do.

T. Denise Anderson a Presbyterian minister in Maryland made a comment in a recent edition of the Christian Century; 'Our prevailing culture teaches us to use 'enemy images' when we encounter those who have perspectives, practices, and beliefs that are different from our own. Whether they are antagonistic toward us or not, we decide that their worldview is a threat.'

The tendency to write them off as enemies because of their opinions or their practices or their appearances is easier to comprehend than to extend the right hand of fellowship. The longer we hang onto our fears of negotiation, the less likely we will ever reach a point of meaningful dialogue and collaboration with our neighbours.

'They is Us'.

Paul seeks ways in which the divisions and the quarrels can be dealt with meaningfully and constructively. He reminds us that the saving grace of God does not come through any human leader but only through the gospel that reveals the saving love of God. It is not human wisdom that will lead us through the obstacles; but, servitude. Sacred listening. Being still and hearing God's voice in ourselves and in each other.

A church in disagreement will only flounder and separate from the true calling of God. God is really in the business of saving people, of redeeming people, of loving people whomever they may be. We really don't understand God.

We don't see what God sees.

God is not looking for us to have the right answer. We are to trust in God to get us through the mid-winter journey of resolving the differences between our brothers and sisters and arriving at a place that allows all people involved to be comfortable and respected with his or her faith.

A place where we all receive God's grace. Amen.