

You've Got a Gift! **“Jealousy? Quarreling? What's With That?!”**

1 Corinthians 3:1-11, 03/02/08

1And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, ³for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? ⁴For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not merely human?

⁵What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each.

⁹For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building. ¹⁰According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

Several years back, the newspapers were all abuzz about a church in East Texas whose deacons had come to a church meeting brandishing pistols and threatening Texas justice if they didn't get their way. Their pastor had to take out a restraining order against them. Believe me, no pastor is really prepared for this. They never warned us in seminary that one of the clearest warning signs that your church has deteriorated is when your church leaders start packing heat.

Arguing? Quarreling? Jealousy? Anger? What's this all about in the life of a church? It's a shame, an embarrassment to the faith, really, but news of church fights is hardly news anymore. Fundamentalists have brought division to every major denomination because the very essence of Fundamentalism is that we all have to agree or somebody's got to go. One of Jan Taylor's close friends has been instrumental in starting a moderate Southern Baptist seminary on the campus and with the cooperation of our Duke Divinity School because of the hard-liners within the Southern Baptist convention. But it's not just denominations and its not just Fundamentalists who get into these fights. Churches have split over such weighty matters as on which side of the chancel the organ console should be placed, which is probably why ours is right here in the center.

Why, I know it will amaze some of you, but even our church has had its share of squabbles over the years. Oh, yes, this place has seen some heated

arguments over racial integration, a Sr. Pastor's involvement leading an anti-war march in Milwaukee, and whether to stay on this hard urban corner at the needy crossroads of humanity or relocate to the suburbs to minister to the people who had migrated there. Our historian tells me that people argued. They raised their voices. They said some ugly things. They got on the phone and buzzed and buzzed and buzzed. Finally, church expert Lyle Schaller was brought in, researched the congregation, and even spoke with the city council. He issued a report and the church resolved to stay in the city. But on these issues, some people left never to return again. And some came and joined because they heard the church had taken a stand.

Of course, I've also been told of fights over lesser matters like pew cushions and paint colors. I remember when a woman in one of Laurie's churches left because of a disagreement over the color of a carpet in part of the church – that would never happen here! And of course there was the big conniption fit over the parlors back in the 70's. The women wanted to improve the furniture and appearance, but the youth were using the parlors, and people were upset about that. The youth were spilling stuff on the carpet and abusing the upholstery. Lots of heat was generated by that tiff.

I know of a pastor who had one long church meeting, maybe fifteen years ago, where they spent two hours heatedly arguing over a \$200 purchase. I mean, people were angry and in each other's faces. Then somebody remembered they had the item in question in their attic and offered to donate it to the church. End of discussion. Then somebody made a motion from the floor to spend \$10,000 on something no one had even researched. That motion passed without comment and they all went home. Sometimes, conflict is the result of people just being people.

And yes, sometimes people get bent out of shape because they don't feel appreciated. Mission groups go to very difficult places to help others, but do they get the thanks they deserve? Noooo. Our sound crew and video people work behind the scenes every Sunday – but no one ever notices them. Our office staff and receptionists, and they want to be noticed and thanked. And our choir – oh, our poor, long-suffering, chopped-liver choir, under the direction of that Tyrant Mark. Would you please let a choir-member know that you appreciated them today? I don't know if I can take their complaining any more.

Did you know there was even a denominational split a long time ago about the placement of the choir. Can you imagine, people objected to having the choir publically displayed in the front of the sanctuary, prominently placed for everyone to see and admire. They said one's attention should be on God, not on those glory-seeking wind-pipes up front. So half of a denomination left and put their

choirs in the balcony or out of sight. And if they couldn't stay awake during the sermon, who am I to blame them?

Speed Leas, a well-known church consultant, says that when he is called in to resolve a church conflict, he found there was a significant value conflict about 28% of the time. The rest of a time, a church was feeling bad about something, and just couldn't put their finger on the reason, but it really wasn't a divisive point in the church. When there is division, he says, it's usually in one of four areas:

Social action. A congregation would disagree over a community-directed ministry, say a food-and-clothing center for farm workers.

Liturgy and how worship should be conducted. For instance, people will fight over whether or not to pass the peace.

Theology, usually charismatic versus non-charismatic or conservative versus liberal.

The lifestyle of the pastor – not a moral problem of the pastor, but disagreement within the congregation about what's appropriate conduct for a pastor. It often centered on dress, community groups to belong to, social drinking, and activities the pastor's spouse was involved in. I thank the congregation that you are not worried about matters like this.

I know, one person's minor irritation is another person's crisis, but it's amazing how small our lives can become sometimes. We do sweat the small stuff, get so wrapped up in minutiae, we lose touch with the things that matter most. We reduce ourselves to a single issue. We major on the minors. We worry more about how we look than who we are. We spend hours on little details and lose the big picture. We fight and divide over trivia and ignore the surpassing value of the relationship itself. We worry about the silliest matters and give no thought to ultimate concerns.

What is it that stunts our soul growth and reduces us into mean, small-minded, petty people? A lack of perspective? A fear of what we cannot control? Plain old selfishness? I think it was Martin Luther King, Jr. who said, "A person wrapped up in himself is the smallest package in the world." But I think most of us long for lives that are larger and more profound.

The church is not exempt from conflict. We see conflict in the church from the very beginning – such as in today's letter from Paul to Corinth. Someone once described the church as a group of porcupines trying to cuddle. Human conflict reminds me of the image used by philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. He compared the human race to Bulldog Ants. If you cut a Bulldog Ant in half, the front will seize the tail with its teeth, and the tail will sting the head. The fight may last for hours. Severed human relationships may last forever.

Rev. Gary Haller - First UMC – March 2, 2008 – “Jealousy? Quarreling? What's With That?!”

The conflict in Paul's church in Corinth was apparently severe and he felt an urgency to deal with it. They had five or six conflicts going on. The one noted in this passage was a leadership conflict. We hear how Paul was just a little too Jewish for some of these Greek Corinthians, too disapproving of their freewheeling culture. They weren't about to live by his rules. Others said "I belong to Cephas" which was Simon Peter's name in his native Aramaic. Maybe some of the Corinthians thought they should be even more Jewish than Paul. I imagine they wore little fishhook pins in their lapels to show they followed the fisherman.

Still others claimed "I belong to Apollos" of whom we know little except he could talk the toga off a marble statue he was such a silver-tongued orator. I don't have this problem, but I know eloquence can be a mixed blessing. Some people adore you more than they should while others instantly distrust you for no good reason. And then, of course, there were those who said, "I just belong to Jesus" with a kind of arrogant one-upsmanship that makes everybody roll their eyes.

Another conflict going in the Corinthian church had to do with morality. A man has slept with his father's wife, promiscuous gatherings were held, and the Corinthians were proud of such freedom. Paul addresses this by giving clear instructions that this is not to be tolerated. And then there is a conflict about spiritual gifts. Some few are speaking in tongues which Paul thinks is well and good. But they are claiming that this gift is better than any other gift you can have. And Paul says that this is nonsense and vanity. In fact, he says, unless you have someone to interpret the tongues, the gift is worthless. We'll be taking a look at Paul's understanding of how gifts work together in a later sermon. The point is simply this: where there are people, there will be conflict. Divisions. Jealousy. Pettiness. But you don't become like Christ by tearing other people down. The good news is that Paul believes that Christians can mature and grow beyond such things, especially when we allow Christ to be our head, our guide, and when we allow ourselves to be ruled by God's love.

Here was Paul's answer: "We all belong to Jesus. You don't belong to me. You don't belong to Peter. You don't belong to Apollos. And whatever gifts you have don't make you better than anyone else. They don't make you belong to Jesus more than anybody else. We all belong to Jesus, the crucified Christ. And following Jesus means we meet each other at the cross." The cross is about humility, not pride. It's about service, not power. It's about speaking the truth in love, not demanding you get your way. It's about forgiveness, not resentment. It's about reconciliation, not revenge. It's about multiplication, not division. It is the cross of Christ which saves us from our self-centered, self-destructive futility, and sends us out with a self-forgetful compassion to find lives rich with meaning and

purpose and relationship. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “What matters in the church is Jesus Christ and him taking form in the midst of a band of people.” What really matters at First United Methodist Church is Jesus Christ and that we allow ourselves to be formed into his body with Christ as our head.

I feel safe talking about church conflict today because our church has shared a spirit of loving harmony in most things for many years now. Oh, here and there, now and then, we all get irritated about something because we’re all still human. But for the most part we get along well and find the church a place of loving acceptance and spiritual challenge. I take no credit for this Spirit of peace among us, but I do celebrate it. It’s a mystery and a gift of God’s grace. But I also think it is a result of our focusing on the ministry of multiplication – not division. That is, rather than fighting over incidentals, this church works hard to feed the hungry and welcome the stranger and house the homeless and protect the immigrant and help people escape poverty. I believe that all of you try hard to learn the way of Christ in the world.

We all belong to Christ. Each and every one of us. We all find our true selves at the foot of his cross. And the light of Christ shines to the world when we love people with God’s love. They did warn us about that in seminary. In fact, Jesus told us about that. One of the clearest signs that we are the church is when people know us by our love. We witness to God’s love and we celebrate that love when we meet at Christ’s table in peace. The peace and forgiveness of that love waits to embrace you today as you come forward to receive this bread and cup, which are concrete symbols of a Savior who so loved you that he gave his life for you.

And so, beloved, let us love one another – for love is of God and whoever loves knows God and has seen God, for God is love. Let us grow in our speaking and acting and living God’s love that Christ would be formed in us. Let us be united as one in that love which is here for all. And may the Christ light shine through us. Amen.