

O, Grow Up!

[Text - 1 Corinthians 3:1-11]

Pastor Dave Shackle

January 31, 2016

In the 1920's and 30's, Will Rogers was one of America's favorite entertainers, social commentators, humorists, and political pundits. His witty sayings were widely quoted and quite memorable, and many of them still ring true today. For example: "America has the best politicians money can buy." "There's no trick to being a humorist when you have the entire government working for you." "Congress is so strange; a person gets up to speak and says nothing; nobody listens; and then everybody disagrees." "Congress reconvenes tomorrow morning. Let us pray: Father forgive them, for they know not what they do!"

As our country's current Presidential campaign clearly demonstrates, political discontent and divisiveness is becoming increasingly bitter and combative. The personal attacks and aggressive behavior isn't just between opposing parties, but within the parties themselves. Of course this isn't just a *political* phenomenon. Some of the most intense and brutal conflicts in human history have come as the result of *religious* disagreements and divisions. Some of those have been between people of differing faiths, yet many occur between people of the same faith, the same denomination, and even within the same congregation!

In this morning's New Testament reading, we hear about one such disruptive struggle taking place within the Christian community in Corinth, Greece. This is a church that was started by the apostle Paul, perhaps one of the most influential evangelists in Church history. Yet even Saint Paul had his problems; and one of those problems was the church at Corinth. Almost half of Paul's writings in the New Testament are addressed to that church. They are grouped into two letters, First and Second Corinthians; yet most Biblical scholars agree that they are made up of at least four separate letters that Paul sent to that church. In each letter, Paul is addressing some new problem or point

of contention that has arisen within that congregation. For some strange reason, there seems to be this reoccurring spirit of jealousy, bickering, and divisiveness among that Corinthian community; and since Paul can't be there to personally address the problem, he does so through his letters.

Now I realize it's not polite to read other people's mail; but today we make an exception. Because by examining just a small portion of Paul's correspondence, you and I can learn some important lessons about what it means to be the Church - the Living, Loving Body of Christ. Paul writes, "For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not...behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, 'I belong to Paul,' and another, 'I belong to Apollos,' are you not showing spiritual immaturity?"

One thing we pick up here from Paul, is that jealousy and divisiveness are often signs of a basic immaturity. He even goes so far as to address those Corinthians, not as "spiritual people", but as "infants in Christ." *Spiritual* people - those whose lives and faith are grounded in a deep and abiding trust in Divine love and goodness, generally realize that petty jealousies and bickering really don't get us very far! Whether we're trying to convey a theological insight or make a political point, listening to what others think and say - and carefully considering how we might best respond - is vitally important for keeping the dialogue at a meaningful and constructive level. Truly mature people of faith understand that they don't have all the answers! Therefore they are willing to listen, adapt, and grow - thereby raising the conversation to a higher plain so that all involved might benefit.

Another thing Paul reminds us, is that faith, like life, is not a competition! In a Christian context, *faith* means that we trust in the overflowing abundance of Divine love and grace, as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus teaches us, and shows us, that there is no shortage of Divine compassion - it is plentiful and equally available to all! Therefore, within a Christian community, there's no reason to create competitive camps or polarizing parties that maneuver for position, acclaim, or some kind of spiritual superiority. Spiritually

mature people delight in seeing *others* grow and succeed and advance in their faith journey. For them, it's not about who gets the credit or the glory, because they know that the glory belongs to God! They also know that there is plenty of work to be done, to help bring about the Divine Realm of Love and Grace; so they are truly grateful for all those who work beside them.

That's one of the remarkable things about the ministry of this congregation. So many of you are personally involved and highly dedicated to seeing that the ministry of this church is faithfully carried forward. And much of the good that you do is done quietly and behind the scenes: Checking-in with those who are hurting or struggling; helping those who are in need; warmly welcoming the new people who come among us; faithfully seeing to it that Christ-like ministry is accomplished, and that we continue to grow together in our mission compassionate outreach.

This brings us to perhaps the most important point Paul is trying to make: That once we realize we really are all on the same team, there will be no place for any undermining spirit of divisiveness within a church, or even within a country! And if we truly want what's best for our church, our country, and our world, we will make it a top priority to put aside, or learn to work around, our differences. In spite of it's brokenness, the Human Family is intrinsically interconnected. Regardless of our human pettiness, the Body of Christ truly is One Body! And if we are to survive and to thrive as a church, a nation, or a world, we must put-aside our prejudice, pettiness, and party divisiveness - and figure out a way to work together for the greater good of all!

I'm no Saint Paul, but here's one simple suggestion: If there are going to be different parties in the Church, then let's make them real *parties*! Birthday parties, bowling parties, choir parties, card parties, pot-luck parties - parties that celebrate life and joy and community! Work parties, knitting parties, food pantry stockpiling parties - parties that do things that are productive, positive and helpful. After all, we may not be able to stop all the negative noise that this election year is

generating, but we can certainly do our best to drown it out with the blast of a good party, the sounds of a joyful worship service, and the beautiful tone of a warm word of welcome and affirmation! As will Rogers might say, "We're all only here for a short spell, so we might as well learn to laugh together and to make the most of it!"

To that I say, "Amen!"