



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – January 13, 2017 Has Christ Been Divided?

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Isaiah 29:13-14

¹³The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote;¹⁴ so I will again do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing. The wisdom of their wise shall perish, and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Divisions in the Church

¹⁰ Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,* by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.* ¹²What 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.'¹³ Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴I thank God* that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,¹⁵ so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

Christ the Power and Wisdom of God

¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Are you a penguin or are you a porcupine?

If you saw the movie *The March of the Penguins*, then you know that Emperor Penguins are remarkably communal animals. When the mothers troop off to gather food for the family, the fathers huddle in a tight clump for over two months protecting the eggs and one another from the brutal Antarctic storms. One by one the fathers shuffle to the outside perimeter of the huddle to take the brunt of the frigid

winds for their fellow fathers before working their way back into the center to warm up. God seems to have coded the Emperor Penguin for self-sacrificial cooperation.

Porcupines . . . not so much. Porcupines are, well, prickly. Every porcupine comes armed with 30,000 quills. They are the original rugged individualists: we may speak of herds, flocks, gaggles, or packs of other animals, but there isn't even a name for a gathering of porcupines. And if, by biological imperative, porcupines have to get together to mate, the enterprise is necessarily conducted with great care. As John Ortberg writes, "a girl porcupine's 'no' is the most widely respected turndown in all the animal kingdom."¹

So, again the question: are we porcupines or penguins? And isn't the answer that we are almost all always a bit of both?

God seems to have blessed us with hearts for communion. Some better angel of our nature yearns to love and be loved, to accept and be accepted, to forgive and be forgiven. It's as if we have some elusive, primal recollection, some dream-like memory of a time, a place, a way of being in which we were one with our God, one with our neighbor and one with ourselves. Call it Eden. Call it heaven. Call it home.

The psalmist sings, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor?" [Psalm 8:4-5] All of us, at least some of the time, have the communal hearts of penguins.

Then again, God seems to have blessed to us the freedom to turn away, to turn inward, to turn toward ourselves. How quick we can be to anoint ourselves the lord of our own lives, turning from God and neighbor to the all consuming "I," "me," and "mine."

The psalmist laments, “They have all fallen away, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.” [Psalm 53:3] All of us, at least some of the time, have the prickly selves of porcupines.

Haven’t you noticed that your own path through life seems to vacillate between the penguin and porcupine ends of the spectrum? Some times, some settings, some colleagues just seem to swell your penguin heart and lift your gaze to the wonders of human potential. Some times, some settings, some colleagues just seem to provoke you to hunker down into your porcupine self, brandishing quills, and fearing the worst of human limitations.

Nowhere is this more apparent than when we come together to work and live with others. Think of every significant collaboration you have ever initiated: your marriage, your partnerships, or your joint ventures. We almost always start with our penguin hearts brimming with hope and optimism. This time, surely this time, our aspirations will be realized, our hopes will be fulfilled, our relationships will be steadily strengthened. Call this the “honeymoon” phase of life together. Honeymoons phases are easy.

And what always happens next? Well, what happen next are better outcomes and worse outcomes, better relationships and worse relationships – but has anyone ever embarked on a significant collaboration that was a honeymoon start to finish? Has anyone ever gotten to a venture’s finish line without rough patches, without quills bristling, at least from time to time? Call this the “ordinary” phase of life together. Ordinary phases are hard.

Just as every collaboration has its “honeymoon” phase, so every collaboration has its “ordinary” phase – even in churches. Maybe *especially* in churches. A concerned parishioner went to his minister to lament that over the years their church had lost some of its cordial geniality. The minister agreed, so during the next Sunday’s service, the minister announced a new practice. “Next Sunday, we will pause during the service to allow all parishioners to greet those around them with a friendly ‘hello.’” As the service ended, the concerned parishioner turned beaming to the woman behind him and said, “Good morning!” She looked at him in shocked indignation and snapped, “That

doesn’t start until *next* Sunday.” Honeymoons are easy; ordinary life together is hard.

It’s only natural that we love the honeymoon phases. We love the hope, the optimism, the effortless ease of cooperation when everybody is at his or her penguin best. And it’s only natural that we be frustrated by the rough patches that come our way in ordinary times. It’s bad enough when we find ourselves bristling and crosswise with adversaries and competitors, but it’s all the more disheartening when we find porcupinish behavior breaking out with the folks we have counted as partners and friends.

But, my friends, we make a significant mistake if we view the ambiguities and conflicts of ordinary life together as unexpected signs of failure – unforeseeable indicators that we have picked the wrong partners. Given our mixed penguin/porcupine nature, some conflicts and tensions are inescapable. They aren’t shocking accidents *to* our life together but rather inevitable incidents *of* our life together. And just because they *are* inevitable incidents of life together, resolving conflicts wisely and well is just as important as laboring peaceably together. Honeymoons are easy and ordinary life together is hard, but it is during the hard work of ordinary times that success is gained or lost. It’s true in marriages. It’s true in businesses. And it’s even true in churches. Maybe it’s especially true in churches.

Certainly it was true in Paul’s church in Corinth. In fact it’s just this circumstance that makes Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians so incredibly valuable to us today. A letter recounting the honeymoon days when Paul first came to Corinth and Christ’s Spirit drew rich and poor, male and female, Jew and Greek, slave and free together into one Spirit-filled family and faith would have made for interesting reading, but that’s *not* the letter we have.

Instead, we have a letter that makes clear in its very first chapter that, for Paul’s church in Corinth, the honeymoon was well and truly over. The heady days of ecstatic conversion had passed and the mundane challenges of resolving disputes over leadership, sexual immorality, legal disputes, benevolence budgets, sex within marriage, spiritual practices, and the meaning of the resurrection had come. Paul’s letter wrestling with the inevitable conflicts surrounding these issues provides all of us our own roadmap for ordinary life

together drawn in one of the very first Christian churches by one of the faith's greatest apostles.

Paul wastes no time coming to the heart of the issue, appealing to his brothers and sisters in the faith, "that there be no divisions among you." Paul had received reports from Chloe's people that there were quarrels among them, schisms breaking out as the Corinthians began breaking into little faith cliques, each claiming allegiance to different leaders – some to Paul himself, the community's founder, some to Apollos, an Alexandrian evangelist of renowned intellectual and rhetorical gifts, some to "Cephas" or "Peter," the legendary disciple of Christ, and some who apparently claimed a direct connection to Christ himself and who therefore needed no earthly pastor.

Paul sets for himself a common task of leadership, the task of bringing unity out of division, cohesion out of schism, and communion out of quarrel. In short, like all community leaders, Paul wants his Corinthians to act more like penguins and less like porcupines.

But if the task before Paul is a common one, his approach is distinctly and uniquely Christian. Paul doesn't advert to the tried and true wisdom of the world; we read none of the perennial managerial, political or psychological techniques for reconciling differences. Instead, Paul frames the issue in starkly theological terms. The solution Paul reaches for is not the worldly wisdom of managerial techniques but rather the spiritual power of God's activity in the world. Paul doesn't see the spats in Corinth as a private challenge to do a little better or a little worse as a *human* project, Paul sees the all-too-human divisions in Corinth as nothing less than resistance to God's *divine* project to transform all humanity.

Listen to the words of Paul's exhortation. "I appeal to you . . . by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ"; "Has Christ been divided?"; "Was Paul crucified for you?"; "Or were you baptized in my name?" Do you see how crucial these exhortations were to every single Christian in Corinth? Do you see how crucial they are to every single Christian in New Canaan? If the Corinthians had thought their debate with Paul was going to inspire a little gentle, fuzzy, pastoral nudging, Paul dispels that notion in his very first chapter. And if you came to church this morning expecting Paul's

letter to offer you a little soft-sell Christianity, well that notion has to go as well.

Paul proceeds to grasp the nettle of the argument right there in Chapter 1, verse 18. "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

Do you hear what Paul is saying? In essence Paul is saying, "Listen, you folks in Corinth are proclaiming a really odd thing. And you folks in New Canaan, don't let 2,000 years of habituation dull your sense of how wild your religion is. You folks in Corinth are proclaiming that God, the creator of all that is, came to earth in the form of a common peasant, subjected himself to criminal conviction and torture, and died an agonizing death on a cross.

"You folks in New Canaan are gathering each week in a room adorned with one of history's most gruesome instruments of pain and execution. Some of you even wear it as jewelry. You might as well be walking around with little electric chair pins.

"The heart of our resurrection proclamation was immediately rejected as foolishness by the elites of Rome, Athens, and Jerusalem in the first century, just as it is rejected as foolishness by some of your most learned dons of Berkeley, Cambridge, and Oxford in the twenty-first century."

"Now," Paul might have explained, "I don't have much of a problem with resurrection. After all, I had a personal encounter with the risen Christ, and dead men don't tend to knock you off horses on the Damascus Road. And you folks in New Canaan might take some comfort from the fact that this extraordinary proclamation empowered simple, fickle disciples to spread their claims throughout the world. But hear me well: the claims of crucifixion and resurrection we all lift up each Sunday morning are so wild that they must provoke a binary response. Either they are true or they are not. Either you believe them or you do not. Either you act as if you believe or you do not. But, either way, you cannot ignore them."

"Let me put it to you this way," Paul might have challenged, "the crucifixion and resurrection of the Christ is either the most astonishing divine intervention in creation history or the most foolish fable dreamed up

by disappointed disciples. Its consequences are either universally significant or utterly insignificant. You Christians in Corinth and New Canaan are either in the vanguard of God's irrepressible movement to redeem all creation or you are deluded adherents of a doomed cult. Either way, you cannot proclaim the resurrection on Sunday morning and ignore its claims Monday through Saturday."

My friends, it comes down to this: if the resurrection is true, if you believe in the resurrection of Christ, even if you're only prepared to act as if you believe in the resurrection of Christ, then there are certain conclusions and actions that follow inexorably.

Does the resurrection mean God has forgiven, accepted, and embraced us in all our mottled ambiguity? Then it must mean that God has forgiven, accepted, and embraced every one of our rivals as well.

Several years ago Miroslav was giving a talk on forgiveness to 175 of our parishioners gathered on a cold, rainy November evening. At the end of the talk, an elderly gentleman rose in the back of the meetinghouse to challenge Miroslav's thesis. "Aren't there some acts that are so heinous that they lie beyond the reach of God's forgiveness? What would Jesus have to say, for instance, to the terrorists who flew those planes into the World Trade Center?"

There was a stricken silence in the meetinghouse. Our congregation had lost 55 husbands, neighbors, partners, and friends in the World Trade Center only months before. It was far too early for disinterested discussion. Miroslav paused and spoke very quietly, very deliberately, very pastorally. "I believe," he said, "that Jesus died on the cross for those terrorists."

Does our baptism mean we have been drawn into the family of God and Christ? Then it must mean that we have been drawn into brotherhood and sisterhood with our baptized adversaries as well.

Do our hearts swell with love for the Christ who loved us so much he died for us? Then how can we not love those others whom our Christ loved as well?

Does Christ's Spirit now live in and empower the church we call the body of Christ? Then how dare we divide that body with our petty quarrels?

James I. McCord, President of Princeton Theological Seminary, used to challenge his students with this question: "If you have a choice between being a heretic or a schismatic, which will it be?" Then he would emphatically answer his own question: "Choose heresy every time! After all, as a heretic you are simply guilty of a wrong opinion. As a schismatic, you are guilty of rending the body of Christ."²

Ultimately, Paul's argument is not so much about rhetorical logic or eloquence as it is about the transforming power of God's love. God's solution to our unending vacillations between communal, penguin love and self-centered, porcupiney prickliness is neither punishment nor acquiescence. Instead, God comes among as the Christ, powerfully modeling love for us and dying to inspire love in us.

1500 years ago, Abba Dorotheo, the abbot of a monastery in the Palestinian desert, illustrated this dynamic with a vivid image. Troubled by the difficulty we have truly loving others, Abba Dorotheo proposed we each view ourselves as spokes of a wheel, each spoke radiating from a hub which is Christ. As we contemplate Christ and His love for us, we can't help but be inspired by him, drawn to him, drawn closer and closer to the hub. And, of course, as we are all drawn closer to the hub, we will inevitably find that we have been drawn not only closer to the love of Christ but also closer and closer to all others whom Christ loves.

Has Christ been divided? Of course not. Rather, in Christ we are all united. As Christ loves us, so we are drawn to and empowered to love one another. Or, to paraphrase a wise pastor, it is as simple and as demanding as this: just as we learn to see Christ in others, so we shall be able to be Christ to others. And just as we learn to be Christ to others, so we shall be able to see Christ in others. **Amen.**

1 John Ortberg, *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 22.

2 James I. McCord, quoted in a sermon given by the Rev. Dr. Fred R. Anderson, "Careful Where You Place the 'I'" 21 January 1996.