

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany, January 15, 2017. St. Augustine's Freeland  
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Isaiah 49:1-7 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 John 1:29-42

If you do Facebook – and if you're on any Facebook page that has gatherings of Episcopalians on it, then you already know this: Facebook – in fact all social media – exploded yesterday about the National Cathedral! For those of you who don't know, it's not the National Cathedral, it's the Washington National Cathedral. In fact, it's not even that; it's full title is the Episcopal Cathedral Church of St. Peter and St. Paul. While the National Cathedral works very hard to be “a cathedral for all the people” it's an Episcopal Cathedral.

The National Cathedral is hosting an Inauguration Prayer Service next week. And the Men and Boys choir is singing at the President's inauguration.

Some Episcopalians don't like that the cathedral and one of its choirs is participating in this way and they want the cathedral to withdraw both from the prayer service and the inauguration. Other Episcopalians have said that while they're not fond of inaugurating the particular man who will become this nation's 45<sup>th</sup> President in a few days they believe that the Cathedral is doing a good thing. And now, some who are opposed to what the Cathedral is doing are engaging in bullying and shaming the other group. Let's be clear here – this is an intra-denominational struggle; everyone is an Episcopalian!

What's a Christian to do?!!

The struggle reflects the fact that we are currently living in a deeply divided nation. As we prepare to celebrate the life of Martin Luther King Jr. tomorrow it's worth considering that this nation is almost as divided as the one King faced back in the '60's. Some of the issues are sadly still the same – racism being the most obvious – not only toward African-Americans but now toward Latinos, and Muslims (at least, the ones that don't look like us). Other issues are still confronting us – or re-confronting us: the role of women, the place of gays, lesbians, and transgendered people – anyone, in fact, who isn't straight, white, male, and older.

So what do we do about the divisions? How should we respond toward those with whom we disagree, sometimes profoundly? And especially, how do we respond when those people are members of the same denomination, or even members of the same congregation?

There's some help beginning in today's epistle. Today we begin a series of readings from Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> Letter to the Corinthians. Actually it's at least the second letter, because in chapter 5 Paul referenced a previous letter he wrote them (vs 9). That's important, because it means Paul wrote to the Corinthians more than to any other community (at least, among the letters we actually have!). There are therefore at least 3 letters, and many scholars believe 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians is actually at least five letters from Paul which have been artfully molded into one. Add those to the one we call 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians and you have six! That makes the Corinthian community, and what Paul has to say to it, very important.

Next week we hear the core of why Paul was writing to the Corinthians: because there were

serious divisions in that new community. Based on what Paul said – we’ll hear quite a bit of it for the next five weeks – it’s obvious that the congregation had split into various factions (1:11). One group reported they were part of the Paul faction, and another, the Apollos faction. Still others claimed to belong to Peter (Cephas), and the last, Christ (1:12). Paul dismissed this factionalism as nonsense. “Was Paul crucified for you?” he asked rhetorically, “Has Christ been divided?” There’s real irony that as part of Paul’s argument he thanked God that he baptized so few in that community! Baptizing only a few might under other circumstances have suggested Paul failed. In this case, it was good, Paul said, because no one could claim him as the leader of a factional group (1:15-16), even though some were trying to do just that.

All the way through this letter, Paul’s explicit hope and desire for the Corinthians was that they be united – it’s even more obvious if you compare some of his language to that used in Greco-Roman philosophical and ethical discussions. For instance, when Paul called on the Corinthians “to be united in the same mind and same purpose” (1:10), that came out of a familiar Greco-Roman discussion about friendship. “Be friends,” Paul said to them all.

So for Paul, unity in the Corinthian community was a very big deal: the highest of priorities. That was an especially important priority, given the reality of Corinth. Corinth was one of Rome’s major transportation hubs – the “Grand Central Station” of the Empire. Reflecting its city, the Corinthian congregation was rich in ethnic and social diversity – certainly the most diverse community Paul founded. With that much diversity, unity was indeed a big deal!

But.....! For Paul, unity wasn’t uniformity – he never called on them to give up their distinctions. As with the Galatian community, the great diversity that existed in the Corinthian community was something to be treasured, nurtured, celebrated. If you read ahead in chapter one you discover that in that community there were educated and uneducated members, high and low status people (1:26). And later (in chapter 7), Paul included the same two sets that showed up in Galatians 3: 28: Jew and Gentile, slave and free (7:17-24). There’s no call from Paul for the individual members of the Corinthian community to give up their distinctive identities and vocations.

Unity in diversity, not unity as uniformity is absolutely central to everything the authentic Paul writes in all of his letters – I can’t emphasize enough exactly how important it was for him. It was the bedrock vision of an egalitarian community on which everything else was built.....is built!

But unity for its own sake was, Paul said, meaningless – it had to be grounded in something else for it to be a true reflection of Christian identity. For Paul the Corinthians’ unity could be grounded in only one thing: the power of the cross of Christ (1:17).

The cross. The cross is central, Paul said to the Corinthians, because Jesus’ undeserved capital punishment has the power to transform a broken and factionalized little church into a community that has a shared, transformative purpose.

Martin Luther King Jr. observed exactly the same thing when preaching at the funeral of the four

young girls murdered by a white supremacist's bomb at 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963.

***“History has proven over and over again,” he said, “that unmerited suffering is redemptive. The innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as the redemptive force that will bring new light to this dark city....These tragic deaths may lead our nation to substitute an aristocracy of character for an aristocracy of color. The spilt blood of these innocent girls may cause the whole citizenry of Birmingham to transform the negative extremes of a dark past into the positive extremes of a bright future.”***

While we are not – yet – trying to blow each other up, our nation continues to be factionalized, broken, and divided. As in Paul's little church in Corinth, so also today we divide ourselves into camps: “pro-gay” and “pro-marriage,” “gun control” and “gun rights,” “pro-life” and “women's rights.” Or even “Pro-National Cathedral Prayer Service” and “anti-National Cathedral Prayer service.” The list goes on and on. Here's the thing, though: just substitute those factional titles for the ones Paul wrote about so long ago in 1 Corinthians.

As with those parties, we too – and too often – retreat into our factions and yell our opinions in the self-confirming echo chambers of those with whom we agree.

And so, while the nation – while our Church” – fights, those who suffer will be the poor, the marginalized, the innocent victims of war, greed, and oppression for whom we as Christians have been charged by our founder – Jesus – with a special advocacy role.

Paul's truth for us today is that calling for unity – whether its around the National Cathedral's prayer service, or the inauguration of the next President – **doesn't mean** we have to give up what's distinctive about us. **It especially doesn't mean** forcing others to give up what's distinctive about them.

It **does mean** for us as Christians (and in the case of the National Cathedral, as Episcopalians) that we are called not to retreat into the factions where we're most comfortable, but to courageously engage one another with truth and love. **And it especially does mean** that we're called to find a common sense of purpose in a transformative and diverse community in which all of us – ALL OF US – have committed through baptism to follow the founding principles of our faith: to love and respect God, others, and ourselves equally; to serve those in need; to offer hope and to share joy, that we can all join together to ***transform the negative extremes of a dark past into the positive extremes of a bright future.***”

Let us pray: Most holy God; your Son prayed that we all may be one. Give us the strength and the grace that comes only from your Holy Spirit; that we may with intention and also with joy carry the good news that if we work together and with one mind – the mind of Christ – then things which were being cast down can be raised up, and things which had grown old can be made new, and that all things can be brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

