

It is getting nasty out there, y'all. It looks like 2020 will be a very tough year for our nation.

We are deeply divided. It is a time of extreme polarization and hyper-partisanship. The American people are split almost right down the middle, and there is a growing chasm between the two sides. And I don't think the situation out there is going to improve as this year progresses.

It's going to be a tough year for our nation.

I don't know about you, but all of this strife makes me long for a simpler time. A time without division. A time of peace and concord.

It's easy to get nostalgic. It's easy to think, "If only I lived in the early days of the church. The time right after Jesus' ministry. A time when the Holy Spirit was incredibly active. A time when there was common purpose and a lack of strife. A pure, uncorrupted time."

Of course, such wishful thinking doesn't match up with reality. We have to look no further than the first chapter of First Corinthians. Actually, last week and this week, we had back to back readings from First Corinthians chapter 1. And we'll have more readings from First Corinthians in February.

Paul is writing within the first generation of the history of the church, about 25 years after the time of Jesus. And yet, even within living memory of Jesus' ministry, Paul is having to deal with dangerous divisions within the church. Today, our epistle lesson begins,

"Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose."

That word "divisions" is not a word that means mild disagreements. It's not a word that means differences of opinion. Instead, it's a word that means rips or tears in fabric. It means forces that are threatening to tear everything apart. Total meltdown. Total disintegration.

Our epistle reading goes on to show us that the Corinthian church has split into at least 4 different factions: so-called followers of Paul, the followers of Apollos, the followers of Peter/Cephas, and the followers of Christ. Those competing factions are threatening to tear the church apart.

In response to such divisions, Paul urges unity: "be united in the same mind and the same purpose."

Be united. Literally, be "knit together." The word was often used medically to talk about setting bones so they grow back together. The word is also used in the gospels, when the disciples are said to be "mending their nets." After all, fishermen aren't going to catch much in nets which are ripped apart. In the same way, the Corinthian church is not going to be effective in its mission if it's being torn apart by factionalism.

So Paul is telling them, be knit together in the same mind and purpose. Now, this isn't a matter of being in agreement over every issue. This is not a matter of everyone needing to think identically. Because Paul is not talking about "your mind" or "your purpose."

Instead, he's talking about the mind of Christ. He's talking about God's purpose. Focus on God's way of doing things, not your human way of doing things. Be united by focusing on Christ, and trying to think like Christ. Make God's way your common ground. Make the mind of Christ your common ground. Stand together there on that common ground. Don't let lesser issues divide you or tear you apart. Be knit together on the common ground of God's way of doing thing.

It's a strong message Paul is giving. It's not about human divisions. It's about being united in following Jesus Christ.

Of course, we have factions and labels that we throw around. But Paul is telling us, don't get caught up in this polarization, this factionalization. The world may do it. But (and this is such an important but)... The world may do it, BUT our values as Christians are supposed to be different from the world's values.

And Paul shows that he is practicing what he's preaching. Because in the succeeding sections of First Corinthians, Paul will say a number of things about Apollos.

Some of the Corinthian Christians appear to be coalescing around Apollos. And some are forming a faction around Paul. And some are forming other factions. And Paul is trying to nip it in the bud. Paul says, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe."¹

And here, the word Paul uses for servant the word *diakonos*, or deacon. "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants or deacons through whom you came to believe."

Should Paul and Apollos be in competition? No Paul says. They are fellow servants, fellow deacons.

And then a few verses later, he says that "(He and Apollos) are God's servants, working together."²

And this time, the word that's translated as "servants" is completely different. It's the word *synergoi*. Synergoi can be translated as "servants, working together." The more traditional translation is, "fellow-workers" or "co-workers."

And there's something hugely important here. Because over and over again Paul uses co-worker or fellow worker in a pretty narrow way.

¹ 1Cor 3:5

² 1Cor 3:8-9

Paul uses this term to refer to people, usually by name. Over and over again Paul uses this term to refer to men and women who are part of his missionary organization. They're his posse. His group. They're part of his church planting team. Timothy, Titus, Clement, Justus, Urbanus, Epaphroditus, Prisca, Aquila, Jason, and many, many others.

But in First Corinthians, Paul adds another name. Not the name of someone on his team. No. Paul adds a name of someone that others view as one of his rivals. Paul adds the name of someone whom others are coalescing around as an alternative leader to Paul.

Yes, Paul is calling Apollos one of his fellow-workers.

They are on the same team. They may have differences. But they are one in Christ Jesus, and ultimately, they're both working toward the same goal of proclaiming his Good News to the world.

In a culture filled with partisan divisions, and in a church filled with divisions, Paul is emphasizing unity. Paul and Apollos and all of the Corinthian Christians all belong to Christ. And that makes them one. Their identity as fellow Christians is more important than anything else.

So it's 2020. And things may get nasty out there. But in here, we need to cling to our identity as Christians together.

Because I'll tell you a secret...

We have Democrats here at St. Paul's. And I am their priest. And you are their brothers and sisters in Christ.

You know what else? We have Republicans here at St. Paul's. And I am their priest. And you are their brothers and sisters in Christ.

And we have Independents here at St. Paul's. And I am their priest. And you are their brothers and sisters in Christ.

And that's part of the reason I try not to take partisan political stands in this pulpit. I have to be the priest for all of you, and it's not fair for me to push my political views on you.

Of course, I have political opinions and as a citizen of the United States, I have to wrestle with how I'm going to vote on certain issues. But this is not the kind of church where you're expected to agree with the pastor on every issue. This is not the kind of church where I will tell you there is only one correct candidate for a Christian to vote for and it is X or Y, or Z.

Besides that, my training is in scripture and theology and worship. I don't claim to have any special training or expertise in political science or public policy.

And besides that, we are a church that values allowing and expecting individual members to wrestle with moral and political decisions and make up their own minds. We do not demand ideological conformity or ideological uniformity. Plus, we see ourselves as a big-tent church where folks with differing views and different backgrounds can all come together, and worship God together.

Having said all that, as your priest, as your pastor, it is important for me also to say this.

We are hearing increasing messages from those on both sides of the political divide that suggest that those on the other side are the enemy.

As your priest I would push back and say, those in this country who differ from you politically are not your enemies. They are rather your fellow Americans who have differing political views, but who nevertheless remain your fellow Americans.

And those Christians who vote differently than you do—they are not your enemies. They are still your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Yes, you may cast your ballots different ways. Yes, you may have divergent opinions as to where this country should be heading. Yes, you may have different bumper stickers on the backs of your cars. But they are still your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Last fall I was listening to an interview with General Jim "Mad Dog" Mattis. You may recall that Jim Mattis was a 4-star Marine general before becoming President Trump's defense secretary during the first 2 years of the Trump Administration. General Mattis spent 41 years in the Marine Corps fighting America's enemies: the Taliban, ISIS, Al Qaeda.

The interviewer asked General Mattis,
"What does the word 'enemy' mean to you?"

General Mattis replied,

"Well, enemy is someone who would take apart our democracy, someone who would destroy the democracy itself. It's not someone who has a different vision of where America needs to go. I don't consider Americans who disagree with me to be enemy of the people or terrorists or something like that. They're just someone to be argued with."

He then said,

"I like a good, hard argument about the issues. And then, let's go off and have a beer or root beer together — a Dr. Pepper — and sit down and enjoy each other's company and find out about each other's family and that sort of thing."

The interviewer asked,

"So you don't think it's okay to label our political opponents as enemies?"

General Mattis replied,

"Never. Fellow Americans may have different ideas. We've had that all through our history. That's what makes democracy work is learning how to compromise and carry forward. Very few things are matters of principle. Most of the time, they're matters of effectiveness — how are we gonna make this work?"³

Y'all, it is getting nasty out there. We are deeply divided as a country. How are we going to make this work?

Jesus commands us, "Love your neighbor as yourself."⁴ I would contend that that word neighbor extends to your fellow Americans, even those who differ from you politically.

But even if you disagree with me, and even if you disagree with Gen. Mattis, even if you think that fellow Americans who disagree with you are the enemy, then I would remind you of the command of our Lord Jesus Christ:

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."⁵

And if we are to pray for our enemies, then we also need to be praying for our neighbors whom we disagree with.

Pray especially for your friends and your family members who differ from you, that your political disagreements may not damage your relationships.

Pray for our leaders in this country. If you're a Republican, that means praying for Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer. If you're a Democrat, that means praying for Donald Trump and Mitch McConnell.

In fact, all of us need to be praying for all of our leaders. Pray for the members of the Cabinet, for our Congress and our Judges. Pray for those in state and local government.

Finally, pray for our beloved country. We have enjoyed 243 years of Independence. Pray that we may continue to be one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

³ *Firing Line*, September 6, 2019

⁴ Mt 22:39; Mk 12:31

⁵ Mt 5:44