

Sermon (1 Corinthians 1: 10-19, 1/22/17):

Increasingly, at the entrance of places where they sell music, there is a rack prominently displaying LPs. The kind of vinyl disks I bought when I was younger to play on a turntable with an arm holding a small needle that glided over the tiny grooves of the record to produce music.

These vinyl disks were delicate things requiring a great deal of tender care – a bit of dust or, horrors of horrors, an easily made scratch could be disastrous. The result would be an annoying repetitious loop of a soundbite that would not stop until the arm on the turntable was nudged.

I, for one, was delighted when CDs made their debut. They were more durable, more portable, and the sound was significantly better. Gone was the hissing and popping that tended to play in the background of turntables.

Seeing the return to popularity of vinyl disks mystifies me. While the large artistic covers they come in are much more eye appealing, I have yet to be enticed to buy one even though down in our basement my old turntable still sits. I still like the CDs and, even better, my IPOD.

A news segment recently told the story of an American Turntable Factory that came within inches of closing its doors. Almost overnight, things suddenly shifted for the better as vinyl records increased in availability. Now the company struggles to keep up with demand.

What's old is new again, as they say. It seems to happen a lot, especially in fashion. If you hold on to those old bowties and tattered jeans long enough, they're bound to be cool again.

What's old is new again. It's the thought that rushed to my mind when I first read our passage from 1 Corinthians. How utterly intriguing it is to note how this first century letter is so applicable to current day circumstances.

'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.'

Be in agreement? No divisions? Same mind? Same purpose? I'm guessing these 'shoulds' sounded as impossible to those who first heard

them as they do to us.

How interesting this passage comes on the heels of the inauguration of a new President during which it would be hard *not* to notice how divided and anxious we are as a nation. We, as in the days of Paul, seem to fair no better in the way we line up behind a variety of personalities and/or ideologies. Insults, accusations, angry words, and even fists being hurled like stones seem to be part and parcel of this side taking. Conservative verses liberal. Pro-Life verses Pro-choice. Social activism verses hardline withdrawal.

‘We have always had our differences,’ President Obama recently said in a final interview, ‘what seems to be different currently is our nearly militant resistant to listen to anyone outside the group we claim to be a part of even though we share a common homeland.’

I’m paraphrasing here but I think he makes a good point. Our narrow allegiances seem to override all things including our ability to dialogue, learn, listen, and seek ways to live together for the sake of the common good. What’s old is new again.

‘I have heard,’ Paul writes, ‘there are quarrels among you. Some of you claim to belong to Paul, others to Apollos or Cephas or Christ. Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?’

So appalled is Paul by this that he expresses his gratefulness that he baptized only a few when he was there so that no one could claim they were baptized in his name.

It was a grand and exciting adventure that Paul had initiated in Corinth...a church filled with unprecedented diversity – Gentile and Jew sharing the same bench; poor and rich eating from the same loaf of bread; the well-educated and not so well educated sharing the same Gospel; slaves and free joining hands in prayer. With such diversity, differences were bound to emerge and the way such differences were handled became critical.

Sadly, it seems, it was not handled well. In fact, the *modus operandi* of the church seemed to mirror the political culture of the day where various groups lined up behind certain charismatic personalities with blind

loyalty – closing eyes, ears, and hearts to any and all contrary thoughts and/or concerns.

‘Some claim to belong to Paul, or Cephas, or Apollos...’

As it did in Paul’s day, the church today is not faring much better. As an institution given the tools and calling to be something different, there are times when one is hard pressed to see where that difference is evident. Perhaps this is especially true given the stresses caused by decline in so many churches these days, which seems to only exacerbate the tension.

I’ve often been asked why churches that are small and struggling don’t simply merge with one another. It seems like a good idea on the surface but it’s a whole lot easier said than done. In fact, given the unique personalities of churches, no matter what their size, merging is about as easy as tying the tails of two cats together.

I guess there is some comfort in knowing we are not alone as is made evident by Paul’s letter. Jesus once said that wherever two or three are gathered there he would be. Maybe, after observing the church in action these past two thousand years, he would add an addendum that says something like wherever two or three gathered there dissension and disagreement are sure to follow.

It seems that Paul’s steadfast belief is that the church can be something better than the cavernous and, sometimes, hostile divides which rule the day. Given the despair I feel when I turn on the news and the equal despair I feel when observing the church battles that grip our assemblies from the national gathering of General Synod down to our individual congregations, there are times when I find it difficult to share in Paul’s certainty.

To be sure, a lot of effort has been made to turn the tide. I have attended many a workshop on how to deal with conflict, I have read and analyzed and discussed to death more case studies than I care to remember, I meet monthly with a gifted counselor on congregational dynamics, I have given thanks on many occasions for colleagues, consistory members, and friends whose wisdom and insights have saved me, I have beaten myself up more times than I can count for those times

when I didn't handle conflict well, and I have tried hard over the years to improve how I respond to situations of tension and disagreement. Even so, what is old seems to always be new again when it comes to the 'my way or the highway' perspective that seems to be the dominant thread of our cultural divide these days.

Perhaps Paul's call to the church to demonstrate a new way that is not the old way is as pertinent today as it has ever been. Is it possible? If it is, what must we do? Can the church, viewed by so many, maybe even us, to be of little significance in the grand scheme of things, really be a breath of fresh air in this milieu of nasty side taking?

Maybe the final words of today's passage offer an important hint-'for the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.' Some scholars, way smarter than I am, call it the theology of the cross...the one thing that sets the church apart from all other things. The cross – Christ's response to the world's dissention, the world's self-centered obsessions, and the world's anger, fear, hate, cold heartedness, and line in the sand determinism.

The theology of the cross – this is the so called 'foolish' way Jesus chose to redeem the world from its perishing ways. To absorb the world's hostilities in his own body, to offer mercy and redemption even to his enemies, to see beyond the burning anger in people's eyes to the belovedness by which they were created, to seek holy goodness even in places where it would be more satisfying to turn to retribution and revenge.

When Jesus was arrested in the garden and Peter tried coming to his rescue with sword drawn, Jesus' rebuked him saying, 'Do you think I cannot appeal to my Father and he will not at once send more than twelve legions of angels?' Jesus then healed the servant Peter had wounded.

The theology of the cross, the response Jesus chose in the face of the world's determination to beat itself into oblivion. We might not be able to force change upon those who differ from us but we can choose how we respond. We can choose to be something different, something better, a beacon of hope in a world where the cycle of hostile assault is as repetitious as one of my old vinyl records stuck in a scratched groove. We

can choose to be something truly new.

To God alone be all the glory. Amen.