

Isaiah 62: 1-5
1 Corinthians 12: 1-13
January 20, 2013
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Like all great leaders, including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the apostle Paul had a dilemma. His deep faith and inspiring message had ignited a fire touching lives far beyond what he had the power to control. You might say that is a good thing and in many ways it is. Yet this popular response comes at a cost. First of all, it raises up powerful opposition. This opposition is not only outside of the communities who follow Paul's teaching; it is inside as well. There are those who disagree with Paul's message or who think they have a better understanding. Paul no sooner leaves a city like Corinth that he hears that groups within the church are fighting over Paul's authority. Different factions develop with the result that the unity of the community of faith is at risk.

In addition to the opposition, there are self styled apostles of Paul who claim to be speaking in his name who take his message beyond Paul's meaning, generating yet more conflict. Dr. King had the same challenges. Intense opposition in the society in general for his attack on deeply institutionalized racism, poverty and violence; and dissension within his supporters by those who thought he was too radical or not radical enough.

What links both Paul and Dr. King is that they were less pained by the opposition in the world in general as much as that which was within the believing community. Both Paul and Dr. King held as their deepest vision the unity of all people under the canopy of a loving God. To lift up the full humanity of all of God's people not just in some future afterlife but in the land of the living will invite opposition.

No, what pained Dr. King and Paul more was the disunity in their own ranks; people who put their own vision ahead of the common vision and who weakened the community by undermining the leadership not just on principles but by personal attack. For Dr. King it was the charge of being an Uncle Tom for cooperating with white people and insisting on non-violence. His expanding the vision to economic justice and opposition to the Vietnam War led to the charge that he was a megalomaniac who had abandoned his Christian principles and was just another social activist.

With Paul it was the charge that he was tearing the newly forming Christian community from its Jewish roots and creating a new and dangerous religion. Like King he was charged to be out simply for his own power.

We miss the point of both of these great spiritual leaders if we reduce them to a set of issues and miss the fact that their deepest yearning and motivation was the unity of God's people. It is only through unity that we witness to the really real world of God's Kingdom brought through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It must be understood that Paul loves the Corinthian congregation. He spent more time in Corinth than anywhere else in his ministry. It is a congregation representing the vast spectrum of the Roman Empire. Wealthy merchants rub shoulders with slaves. Jews and Gentiles, newly converted pagans worship with people who knew people who knew Jesus. Women and men find themselves on equal footing as sisters and brothers in Christ. For Paul, all are one "in Christ."

But teaching and growing the Corinthian congregation into a harmonious community was like herding cats. And here is the nub of the matter:

It is one thing to go to church; it is quite another to *be* the community of faith. It is one thing to attend worship, serve on committees, and carry out the tasks which are necessary to keep the organization going; it is quite another to be the visible and *experienced* Body of Christ in a given community.

In Corinth, there was a lot of energy and activity; but it was as if everyone had their own individual tie to God and none with each other. There was no overarching understanding of what it meant to be a body of believers seeking to witness to the Gospel *together*. There was no sense of being involved *together* in a common ministry where each individual's activity is part of a greater whole. When the sense of the common life is lost or doesn't exist then inevitably the common enterprise becomes the maintaining of the institution. Once maintaining the institution becomes the primary objective conflict is likely to follow. Why? Because the source of the ministry has been long forgotten. And while a group of people might profess their reliance on God, in fact they behave as if it all depended on them—or at least the *them* who feel that they are doing most of the work. And so, when Paul turned his back and went to Ephesus and the strong leader was gone, factions developed and things fell apart.

We should not be surprised at this. The pull of the world is centrifugal. That is, it pulls us away from the center. In Rochester there was an amusement park with a ride called Tilt-a-Whirl. People enter this walled in circular construction and stand against the wall. The structure begins to rotate faster and faster and soon the bodies of the people are plastered against the wall. It is at this point that the bottom drops away. This I submit is the pull of what Paul would call the world of the flesh. It pulls us into ever increasing levels of stressful activity until we feel

trapped and when the bottom disappears we feel that we cannot slow down because if we do we will fall through the hole.

That is why Paul teaches the Corinthians to focus on the centripetal or centering power of the Holy Spirit of God in Jesus Christ. It is why he reminds the Corinthians that they did not create the church nor are they ultimately responsible for its success or failure. *God in and through Jesus Christ has created the community of faith. God through the Holy Spirit sustains the ministry. It is in Christ that we have the peace of knowing that all we have to do grow together in God's love in Christ and we will grow in compassion and openness to the suffering of the world.*

In good old reformed theology we are taught that while you woke up this morning prepared to come here and arrived, you were not the primary agent of coming to worship. The love of God in you and for you brought you here. Your task every day is to be mindful that God through the Holy Spirit calls you into each new day in order for you discover his sustaining power. What are the things you yearn for? They are God inspiring you to grow in fulfilled life.

And when you walk through the doors of this or any church, trust that God has inspired each person, whether they are aware of it or not, to come and worship. That is our common identity. And when we become mindful not only of God's yearning within our individual hearts. But that together we are God's collective yearning to be known in Guilderland, we begin to get a glimpse of the breathtaking vision of what the Kingdom of God is in us and in our midst.

Amen.