

“Church Unity”

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Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

My daughter used to love listening to history and crime podcasts when we went on road trips. One time, we headed on a long adventure, and she listened to a podcast about Jim Jones. As pastors, we often say, “Don’t drink the Kool-aid!” We use Jim Jones as a cautionary joke, but this was the first time that I really listened to the story and I was appalled to realize that Jim Jones actually had a lot in common with my brand of Christianity.

I had always heard about Jones as a Pentecostal minister. How he would have spies in his congregation, who would go through the garbage of parishioners, so that Jones could use the information to manipulate them. He would pretend to have supernatural knowledge about his members. I knew about the chicken livers that Jones kept on display. He told people that they were cancerous tumors that came out of the bodies of people he had healed. He became renowned as a faith healer. (And, scientists have proven that faith healing is possible. The endorphins that we produce with positive thinking can be powerful.)

I heard all of this and thought, *He was just a really conservative Pentecostal guy. Nothing to do with me!*

But then I learned that he had become a part of the Disciples of Christ Church in San Francisco. Now, that’s a fairly progressive denomination. It was a liberal church, known for its work against racism. I became a little more uncomfortable.

Then Jim Jones encouraged a group of people to join a commune in the jungles of Guyana. There, he convinced 918 members to drink Flavor-Aid laced with cyanide poisoning. About a third of them were children. Hearing the details of the story shook me to the core, because usually I can shrug those sorts of things off. But this person believed many of the same things that I did. It made me pause.

Religion has always been a place where leaders have the capacity to manipulate others. It’s been that way since the beginning of Christianity. Early church leaders understood this and warned against it.

We can see it in the letter that Evelyn read this morning. Paul had been in Corinth for about 18 months, and then he moved on to Ephesus. But he kept in contact with the congregation in Corinth. They were having divisions in the church, based on who baptized them or whose teachings they followed. Some in the congregation were drawn to Paul, others to Apollos, and others to Cephas. The members aligned themselves with their leaders, instead of aligning themselves with Christ. And so, they began to bicker about it, and they began to take sides. They had a lot of other things going on as well in this community—there was a man who was sleeping

with his stepmother. And they were showing favoritism to the wealthy members of the congregation, allowing them to eat first at the potlucks, while the poorer members had to eat the leftovers.

I often hear people say that “we need to get back to the purity of the early church,” but when I read these letters, I realize that things weren’t that much different. They had their own issues.

Paul tried to soothe over the divisions by saying, “I planted the seeds, Apollos watered them, but God made them grow.” In other words, there will be different people in the life of a community who will do different things. They will have great impact on your lives. And the church needs to respect the different gifts of pastors, while not becoming too attached to one particular leader.

I think this is an important thing for our church to hear. The great thing about the history of First Presbyterian Church of New Canaan is that you have had some amazing pastors. Guthrie was like the town mayor. He rood down the streets on his bicycle. He made bold decisions about civil rights and he risked his job for them. Gary was an extraordinary preacher. I remember meeting Gary, and his charisma was so powerful that something inside of me melted. I also knew Paul. He was a deep, spiritual leader, who sat with people in their heartache. He had a quiet wisdom.

The wonderful thing about this congregation is that you have had some amazing pastors. But, the difficult thing about this congregation is that you’ve had some really amazing pastors! When I hear stories about the church, nostalgia often takes over, and memories of past ministers become almost mythical. I have heard that when Guthrie was here, there was never once a weed in the whole entire landscape of the church! When Gary was here, church attendance soared to 800 people overnight!

I did a little bit of fact-checking. Neither fact is true. It’s nostalgia. It’s that beautiful ability to remember mostly the good things about the past.

It could be easy for you to say that you are a part of the church of Guthrie or Gary or Paul. But if you continue to that, it will cause damage to the church. Nostalgia keeps the church looking backward to the glories of the past, instead of realizing that **your best days are ahead of you**. God is calling you to important work but if our heads are always stuck, looking in the rearview mirror, we will miss what’s on the horizon. And I promise you that whoever stands in this pulpit in the years to come will never be able to compare to the power of nostalgia.

Nostalgia is so powerful that it made the children of Abraham and Sarah long for slavery. Nostalgia is so powerful that it makes families go to Disneyworld in August! Nostalgia is so powerful, that you could call the most talented preacher in the world, and if you are clinging to the mythologies of the past, you will never hear what they have to say.

Nostalgia will harm this church. And not only nostalgia, but also apathy. Since I have been here, I have heard countless times, “We’re going to take it easy during the interim period. We’re going to hang back a bit and see what happens. We’re going to wait for the ‘real’ pastor to arrive on the scene.” If you’ve been thinking this, please stop. The church is not the preacher. Whenever I ask people why they attend this congregation, they always say that it’s because they love the

community so much. They love the people here. And yet, so many people are too focused on who is standing in the pulpit.

The new pastor is not going to save you. They can help you look toward the horizon. But if he or she tries to impose a vision onto this congregation, it might work for a while. But your vision and calling needs to come from you, the gathered community.

I think what this letter is saying is, “It doesn’t matter if you have Paul, or Apollos, or Gary, or Guthrie, or the other Paul leading the church. God makes it grow.” And if the congregation continues to hang its identity on the memories of a man, instead of who God is calling you to be, then you could be in danger of increasing in apathy.

I grew up evangelical. We attended a mega-church, with a dynamic preacher, who was also a best-selling author. When the pastor retired, the church died. There were thousands of people who simply went to another church or decided to stay home. Our family was one of those who left. We went to another evangelical church with a charismatic pastor, and it grew, until the pastor had an affair with the Associate Pastor’s wife. Then that church died. And now we are seeing evangelical churches across the country waning, because they had a model of looking toward one charismatic man or woman, and they built everything on that personality.

I thoroughly confused my family when I decided to become Presbyterian. At the time Evangelical churches were booming and Presbyterians were beginning to experience decline. They asked about my choice and I surprised myself by saying, “I want to become a Presbyterian minister because it’s not all about me. I’m a page in the history of the church. We believe in strong lay leadership. We have elders and deacons. We have checks and balances, and the church does not depend on the charisma of a single man or woman.”

One of the architects of the Presbyterian Church was John Calvin. And you can say a lot about Calvinism and its negative influence in the world, but its genius is the structure that allows a group of lay people to be its spiritual guides. Pastors can come and go, they can have a huge influence on the church, and they can encourage health or dysfunction, but the focus should always be on loving God and loving your neighbor. And our system allows for that.

I have served three growing churches as an installed pastor, and I have written two books on church growth. I worked as a columnist and consultant for the past ten years, looking at church growth and planting movements. My husband planted a church. I love this stuff. I’m all over it. In my work, I have seen countless trends in the church.

At first, the answer was to have a strong preacher, like William Sloan Coffin. Then Presbyterian Churches decided that they needed to be like Evangelical Churches. Get a rock band and play Christian contemporary music. Remove the choir and replace it with a praise and worship team. Get screens instead of bulletins. Other times, we have looked toward business practices, and thought that they held the key. We talked about branding and marketing, social media, and tech strategies. Then there was a period of the emerging church movement. Now churches are trying out food and farming, and dinner churches. They are experimenting with monastic chanting, and medieval liturgies.

Now we realize that the culture no longer looks toward the famous Protestant preachers. The media quit focusing on prominent Mainline voices. The Evangelical movement has boomed and busted in my lifetime. Younger generations are angry at the homophobia, sexism, and religious right politics. People are realizing that the cycle of business is about 5 ½ years, and so the Harvard Business Review does not hold the secret of church growth. With all the optimism of tech and social media, we are also more aware of its dangers. All of these things are trends. Just like academic robes and stoles. They are trends.

But do you know what has lasted 2,000 years, in all of its forms? The Christian Church that loves God and loves its neighbors. The church that sees its identity in Christ, rather than in a human.

May it be so, here, in this place. To the glory of God or Creator, God our Liberator, and God our Nurturer. Amen.