

UUMAN
Sermon: From Corinth to Roswell
July 3, 2016

When I was in seminary, I had to take a class on preaching.

Our professor explained how the class was going to go. Throughout the semester, we would each prepare and deliver four sermons and be judged by a group of our peers and a teaching assistant. We would be assigned biblical texts according to a pre-selected list.

I was a little worried about this, and met with the professor. “We don’t typically preach out of the Bible,” I said. “Can I preach on a topic, rather than a text?”

“No,” he said. “This is a class on *Christian* preaching. The whole *point* is to learn how to preach from the Bible.”

“Oh well,” I thought to myself. “Hopefully, I’ll learn transferrable skills.”

We got the first list of assignments, and my passage was from First Corinthians, chapter one.

¹⁸ The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved. ¹⁹It is written in scripture: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will reject the intelligence of the intelligent. ²⁰Where are the wise? Where are the legal experts? Where are today's debaters? Hasn't God made the wisdom of the world foolish? ²¹ In God's wisdom, he determined that the world wouldn't come to know him through its wisdom. Instead, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of preaching. ²² Jews ask for signs, and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, which is a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. ²⁴ But to those who are called—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God's power and God's wisdom.¹

If I may paraphrase, this is the way I heard it. “You non-believers are foolish because you don’t believe the message of the cross. We Christians believe, so we have God’s wisdom and power, and we’re saved. *You* are being destroyed.” It wasn’t lost on me that this foolishness they were calling out was pointed right at me. How was I going to preach on THAT to a room full of Christians, many of whom were biblical literalists?

I approached my teaching assistant and asked if there were any flexibility in the assignment. Could I swap this passage for another? He asked my name and when I told him, he kind of rolled his eyes. “Oh, it’s YOU,” he said. “The professor told me about you. No, you can’t switch. You have to preach on what you’re assigned.” (You know – foolish you and wise us.)

¹ Common English Bible, 1 Cor 1:18-24

Let me step back a minute and tell you where I'm heading with all this. I'm going to share with you the sermon I prepared for my preaching class, but I'm going to embed it in a larger story... not only of how I responded to a hostile passage in a way that felt true to my Unitarian Universalist perspective, but also how it can relate to us today.

After a two-year search process, we are in the midst of welcoming our new settled minister, Dave Dunn, who officially started on July 1st. We've been through the process of deciding whether we want a minister (and what kind of minister) and now that Dave is here we have the opportunity to reflect on our community and our shared ministry, as we move forward and decide how we want to build the future of our congregation.

As we look both backward and forward from this milestone, I find First Corinthians oddly relevant. We are entering a period of change and growth, both personal and communal. We may have different opinions about our congregational priorities and how Dave can best serve us. We may come into conflict over our differences, and as we work through these conflicts, it will be important to make space for each voice and to treat each other respectfully. As I share with you my sermon on First Corinthians, I invite you to consider it in that context.

Here, with very minor tweaks, is the sermon I delivered to my class.

Good morning. We all know that being a part of a church community, a body of believers, means that we are graced with a community that never has conflict, right? Nobody ever scraps for power or control, nobody ever views their position or opinion as more important than anyone else's, and certainly every individual is in alignment with the spirit leading the church, working never for their own interests, but only on behalf of the divine will. Right?

Oh, if only it were so. But here in the real world, we see churches peopled by... well, people, and that means that conflict will arise. An article in Leadership Journal a few years ago included a joke about the inevitability of church conflict.

A man was stranded on a desert island. After some months, a rescue boat arrived. The captain rowed ashore and asked the castaway, "What are those three huts?"

"That's my house and that's my church," the man answered, pointing.

"And what's that one over there?"

"Oh, that's where I used to go to church."

One result of church conflict can, of course, be lost membership. But the underlying question is how do we treat each other in our faith community? How do we remain in right relationship, through our disagreements?

Like most churches, UUMAN has had its share of conflict. We've come a long way in how we handle it, and I'm proud of the way we work together. But about ten years ago, our congregation was a bit more divided, a bit more contentious. I remember a time we were struggling to stretch thin resources while planning a budget. Everyone had a favorite program they didn't want to see cut. "You can't cut the music program," some said. "We have such an excellent program, and it is such an integral part of the worship experience. It would be a disaster to cut it."

"You can't cut the religious education program for the children and youth," others said. "We have so many families that come for that, and it draws more families in. It would be a disaster to cut *that*."

"You can't get rid of the cleaning service," others said. "It is vital for the financial health of our congregation to rent out our facilities, and people will not want to rent it if it's not clean and in tip-top condition."

Everyone spoke of how vital one part of the budget or another was, and yet we could not afford them all. UUMAN had a lot of wonderful programs, and people were passionate about the ones they supported.

The divisions among us showed themselves again when we spoke of the income anticipated from various fundraisers. Some wanted money brought in from fundraisers to go to the general operating budget. Others wanted dedicated fundraisers for specific ministries... a concert to raise money for the music program, a series of movies and candy sales to raise money for the youth program. Factions were contentious, and worked to increase their numbers by convincing others of their position. People in each group complained about the priorities held by the other groups. Many felt frustrated, angry, hurt, and unheard.

Now, I don't know if you've noticed, but in the individualistic, selfish, power-hungry and consumerist culture in which we live, it sometimes seems that people in competition will do almost anything to come out on top. Often, there is a mentality of scarcity, and the acquisition of resources -- if not all of life -- is viewed as a zero-sum game in which people believe that for me to win, all y'all have to lose. Self-interest is the highest value, and advancing one's own agenda at the expense of others is not only fair play, it's expected. Those not in alignment with one's own position are treated as the enemy.

Sometimes it felt like UUMAN's various program supporters were fighting over the budget like they were contentious stakeholders at a business meeting, or opposing groups arguing at Town Hall. Not only were people scrapping for resources for their individual areas, but the temptation was always present to slip into the values of the outside world rather than those of our faith community. Me first, and forget the rest of you.

Where was the willingness to listen respectfully to the other viewpoint? Where was the reach for collaboration, in which everyone's opinion would be heard and valued? Where was our commitment to treat each other with patience and love? Where was the willingness to sacrifice our own interest for the health of the institution? The values of our faith community are not those of the outside world. For us, it is paramount to be in right relationship, even when we disagree on

fundamental issues. When we covenant to be in relationship with each other, we leave the standards and norms of behavior of the outside world at the door.

Now, lest you think this a modern problem, or one associated only with the theologically diverse congregations of Unitarian Universalism, let me tell you a story about Saint Paul.

Paul established a community of Christians at Corinth, and had a lively exchange of letters with them. It seems that Paul heard from some folks about problems in the community. The community was divided, with different factions laying claim to different leaders of the Christian movement, and members competing with each other by boastfully displaying their gifts and jockeying for position and prestige. Some would say “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” There was disunity and discord.

So Paul responds with the letter we know as First Corinthians. After identifying the problem of disunity and exhorting the people to be united in Christ and without division, Paul gives us today’s text. Paul is pointing out that what they adhere to in their community, their view of wisdom and strength, is completely different from that of the world. In *this* community, Paul says, we follow our *own* standard for wisdom and power, even if it looks like foolishness to others.

The unifying principles within Unitarian Universalism may not be the same as in a more Christ-centered denomination, but Paul’s message is sound. The way wisdom and power are defined within a faith community is not the same as the way they are defined in the rest of the world. In our community, we covenant to be in right relationship. That doesn’t mean only when we all agree and it’s easy. It means even when we have different opinions, like about what programs the congregation should fund.

It’s one thing to make an argument for why you think a particular part of the budget should be left uncut, but it’s another thing to be dismissive of the other positions, as if yours is the only one that matters. “I belong to the music program? I belong to the youth program?” What’s that? “I belong to Paul. I belong to Apollos.” When the congregation enters discussion to hammer out a budget, it is NOT like a Town Hall argument, it is a meeting of the faithful trying to reach a solution that is best for all parties involved and for the congregation as a whole. We do not hold up signs and try to shout down the opposition. We do not send out neighborhood flyers trying to drum up support for our side, to vote down the other side. We do not divide into camps, where each is an enemy to the next.

The values of our faith - - our views on the source of wisdom and power - - are what govern our interactions with each other and our process for working out differences. Like Paul’s community, we must be united in faith.

While disagreements over a budget are not the only conflicts that occur in a church, most conflicts are fueled by a struggle for power.

Jim Coggins, in the April 2004 issue of the Mennonite Brethren Herald, describes a conflict he witnessed in his church. Jim says, “During the aftermath of our business meeting at the church a

few months ago, I could only sit in my seat stunned and shocked by what I was hearing and seeing. People I had grown to love and respect were suddenly shouting at each other, were tossing accusations around at one another, and were showing not even the remotest consideration for anyone's feelings or for the surroundings they were in. I still cannot believe what I witnessed that night."

Jim points out that there are many issues that can spark church conflict: vision, theology, finances... However, in addition to being a place where disagreements can sometimes degenerate into anger, bitterness, and broken relationships, church is also a place of repentance, forgiveness, and genuine reconciliation. Jim points to several examples where conflict did not end badly but instead, people behaved in a way consistent with their faith. These examples may not reflect the particulars in our congregation, but they do illustrate people working to remain in relationship.

In one church, communion was traditionally taken with everyone drinking from the same cup. Some young professionals wanted to change to individual cups for health reasons. Older members opposed the change in order to preserve the symbolism of the common cup. A vote was taken, and the change was approved by a small margin. At that point, the young professionals stood up and proposed that no change be made because they did not want to split the church. A few weeks later, the older members went to the church leaders and proposed that the change be made, in response to the openness displayed by the younger folks.

In another example, the church board disciplined several members for their divisive attitudes and actions. Several apologized to the congregation and remained in the fellowship. However, one man, while he admitted he had done some things improperly, was reluctant to apologize to the congregation. The board told him that he would be excommunicated unless he apologized at the next business meeting. On the day of the meeting, he relented, stood up in the congregation and offered a sincere apology. Was his apology accepted? The moderator ran down the aisle to embrace him.

Without question, we each have different experiences, perspectives, and gifts to bring to our church communities. Periodic disagreements are inevitable. The world has one way of claiming power when differing interests collide, and these sometimes creep into our communities of faith. It happened in UUMAN. It happened in Jim's Mennonite community. And it happened in the community at Corinth.

So what makes the difference between a disagreement where people jockey for power to get their way, and one where each side is willing to defer to the other, or poor behavior is followed by an apology and reconciliation? Paul puts his finger on the answer when he says "the conventional measures of wisdom and power are not *our* measures of wisdom and power." At UUMAN, we measure our values by faithful living and right relationship. When we disagree, we have a loving way to address the disagreement. Sometimes we need to be called to account, as Paul does with the community at Corinth. But by living our religious values, we can effectively and faithfully manage disagreements as they arise.

Hosea Ballou, a Unitarian Universalist minister from the early 1800s, said “if we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good. Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace.”

May we all be diligent in living the values of our faith. May we listen before we speak; may we respect others, even in disagreement or conflict; may we practice forgiveness and reconciliation, and may we gently call each other back to a faithful way of being in community if we see each other drifting into unhelpful ways of the world.

I leave you with this quote from Hafiz, a fourteenth century Persian poet.

*I have come into this world to experience this:
people so true to love that they would rather die before speaking
an unkind word, people so true their lives are a covenant—
the promise of hope.*

May it be so.