

Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Epistle, Year A

BELONGING

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Analysis by Cathy A. Lessmann

10 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. 11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. 12 What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." 13 Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 14 I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. 16 (I did baptize also the household of Stephanus; beyond that I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. 18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

DIAGNOSIS: The Smart Way to God

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Division and Conflict

We humans just can't get over our penchant for dividing ourselves up into separate groups that then end up bickering and

quarrelling with each other. In Corinth, the Christians were claiming superiority over each on the basis of who baptized them – Paul, Apollos, or Cephas, as if which group one belonged to made one better than the others. The fallout was that they weren't working together towards the same purpose, with the same mind (v. 10), and Paul was exasperated.

It's easy to identify with this phenomenon because we experience it ourselves today – big time. Look at how Americans have polarized into opposing political camps. Look at the rancor that dominates our conversations. We can't agree on a common goal, not even global warming. It's gotten so bad, we have to unfriend each other on Facebook! But, getting closer to home, are our Christian communities that much different from our political communities? And closer still, how about our familial communities?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): The Bottom Line
As if strife and division weren't bad enough, an even more serious problem is that we just can't stop ourselves from behaving the way we do. It's simply in our DNA to seek out those who agree with us. Deep down, we hope that solidarity will (magically?) bequeath rightness on us. And then we try to validate such rightness by juxtaposing ourselves with others: WE must be better than THEM. All of which exposes the fact that we try to placate God via the most obvious (smart?) way we know: by EARNING and DESERVING it. (We call that the Law.)

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Ceasing to Belong
Alas, God is not fooled by our cleverness and our self-validations. Rather, God critically holds us to the standard we insist upon being judged by. The outcome is brutal. Being half-right or more-right is still not right enough. Self-trusters, Law-trusters, are destined to perish. Kicked out of God's Family.

PROGNOSIS: The Foolishness of the Cross

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Belonging to Christ

But, marvelously, it seems God wants us in his family, he wants to embrace us as His own. He wants to save the perished. He set about to make that happen in a way no “smart” person would or could possibly conceive of. It seems absurd—that God would save sinners by absorbing God’s own judgment into God’s self! Such an incredulous act of mercy! Yet even more amazing and heartbreaking, is God’s method: God permits the Law to execute his beloved Son on a cross – the crassest, basest, most foolish-to-our-sensibilities transaction imaginable. But then God raised Jesus from the dead thereby invalidating the power of the Law. On Easter, a new power was unleashed: the “saving” power of mercy and forgiveness.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): The Remarkable Transaction

In that merciful transaction, God accepts Jesus’ rightness for sinners’ unrightness which then secures re-admission into God’s family. And get this: Rather than earning and deserving such a cherished position, it simply happens when one trusts the Rescuer and his Agent extraordinaire – Jesus.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Belonging to Others
Back in the family, relieved of the demands of the Law, a sense of calm freedom abounds. Quarrelling, quibbling and segmenting cease to dominate human interactions because each considers the other of supreme value and equal importance. That in turn prompts cooperation as all now share the same goal: getting the estranged back into God’s blissful family.