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St. Timothy's Episcopal Church
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3 Epiphany, Year "A": Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 5-13; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18;
Matthew 4:12-23

Title: United in Mind and Purpose

At about this time three years ago we witnessed the inauguration of Donald Trump, forty-fifth President of the United States. Some are happy about that; others not so much. I dare say that the past three years have been as contentious, troubling, and concerning as any and probably more than any other time in my life-time. Most people I know report feeling much the same way. Obviously, we are not all like-minded, all the time.

But the lessons this morning invite us, or so it seems to me, to be RE-minded that we are our better selves such that when we disagree we strive to do so without being disagreeable and when we at least can acknowledge the good intentions of the other in the pursuit of our common purpose. I say this because surely arriving at an understanding of our common purpose is the point and the goal. An understanding of our common purpose must *at least* be the starting point – otherwise, there can be no point.

Political races inevitably lead to an inauguration which, by definition, is a ceremony marking the beginning of a new thing; a new leader, new ideas, new initiatives. But our Gospel this morning reminds of an even more important inauguration for we see this morning no less than Jesus initiating a new thing.

As he moves out of the area of his hometown and sets up housekeeping in Capernaum, we see him gathering around himself his own cabinet; gathering around him those he is choosing to help him in his task of *inaugurating*, if you will, a new world order. A world order grounded in and insistent upon a world view that we love our neighbor, that we love one another, and that we love that which God loves – all things which have the capacity to make us whole.

Also, quite interestingly, we find our brother Paul this morning talking about disagreements and divisions, but in this case he talking about disagreements and divisions in the church. And by way of this letter to the church in Corinth, we are witness to Paul instructing on how, as lovers of God and of Christ's teachings, we as Christians are to think about and manage disagreements – particularly inside the church and I would argue, by extension, outside the church as well.

Let us see how this might be true.

Paul writes: 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.

Sounds good. Sounds simple enough. But know this: What is required in making room for unity is a grounding in and an embracing of an acknowledged common purpose.

You know the early churches did not have names. They were simply called an ecclesia, which is the Greek word for a gathering – what we now translate as congregation or maybe parish.

But if the church in Corinth had had a name other than simply ‘the church’ or ‘the congregation’ it is for sure that there would have been a great division around what it was to be called. From what we read in Paul’s letter we can very well imagine that some in the church in Corinth would have wanted to name it the Church of St. Apollos. Others would have had it be St. Peter’s, while yet another faction would have insisted on the name, St. Paul’s. Some may have simply wanted to call it Christ Church.

We can say this because we learn from Paul’s letter that he had heard of divisions in the church. The divisions had to do with which of the leaders and teachers who had a connection to that place (and obviously there were several) deserved the most loyalty, the most honor and admiration.

Apparently an early Christian teacher in that congregation had been a woman by the name of Chloe. She had been followed, or maybe had been preceded by another whose name was Apollos. Maybe even St. Peter had stopped by and served as supply priest on a Sunday when baptisms were scheduled and had indeed baptized some in the congregation.

And so there had come about a spirit of divisiveness in the church. And this divisiveness had become so deeply rooted, so “hot,” that it was interfering with the church’s ability to *be* the church and thus threatening the churches relevancy.

And so Paul had heard of these divisions and it troubled him deeply. And so he wasted no time getting at this matter in his letter. He, in effect, says to the congregation in Corinth: Stop it. Just stop it. Be reminded of who and whose you are. At our core we are not the church of Cloe, or the church of Peter, or I - Paul – rather we are all ‘of the church’ that sprung from the life, work, and death of Christ. We are all members of the community that looks to Christ as our source; looks to Christ for instruction as to how to know the mind of God and how to best be in communion with God and with one another. Know that. Let THAT be that

which unifies us. Find your 'like-mindedness' in that reality. Let that reality be that which grounds you and grounds this community of saints.

But let us be clear. This appeal for unity was not an invitation to become a community devoid of passion. This was not an appeal that the church become a group of like-minded zombies. Paul was not that naive. He knew, for example, that even among Jesus' disciples there had been controversy. You may recall that two of Jesus' disciples, James and John (the so called 'Sons of Thunder'), had come to Jesus in secret and asked that when Jesus came into power would Jesus please promise that one of them would sit on his right and the other on his left. Well, when the other disciples found out about this, they were not amused. In fact they were mad as the dickens. How dare these two ask such a thing? Who do they think they are? And so there was tension in the air – even the rare air that Jesus breathed.

Ultimately, Jesus, of course, did not promise the 'Sons of Thunder' the seats of honor they had asked for. Rather Jesus used the controversy as a teaching moment instructing that greatness is not to be found in status but rather in servant hood. In other words, Jesus brought them back to their ground of being and now with their minds and spirits re-focused - the original issue that had had the disciples in such an uproar lost all of its power.

Another example of tension in the early church. We know that as the church was just beginning to take shape and form, Paul of Tarsus and Peter – the Rock -- find themselves in hot water with the church in Jerusalem for having baptized Gentiles. Now, know that this was no little matter. It was a big deal. A *really* big deal. Baptizing non-Jews was not what the leaders of the church had in mind and they were not amused. This break with orthodoxy precipitated not one but two church councils which were held in Jerusalem. The end result was that by way of council, that is to say by way of purposeful discussion where not only were arguments made but listening ears were put on, common ground was found – indeed new directions, new understanding, even a revised theology was born. Indeed as a consequence of these first two church councils not only was a new theology of inclusion embraced but a new church was born – one that that now included Gentiles – that is to say, includes you and me.

Dear ones, this is Paul's point in his letter to the Corinthians -- that in matters both big and small we are called to always remain in community. We are called always to remember who and whose we are. And we are called to love one another. And we are called to live in such a way as to set an example for others to follow.

The writing of Charles P. Siegel in the magazine, *The Lutheran*, is instructive. Therein he points out that Paul's concern was that the factionalism in the church was harming the church's reputation among pagans. The factionalism

was so intense and so visible that it was making the church look less appealing to those on the outside who were not yet churched. And that, of course, cannot be a good thing because it was, as I say again, rendering the church less relevant in a world, then as now, desperate for spiritual, ethical, and moral relevancy.

Well, Jesus is ready to begin his ministry. He walks down to a lakeside and calls four fishermen to follow him. He calls men whose livelihood has been to seek out that which could not be seen, that is to say that which was under the water – that is to say namely fish. Jesus now calls these fishermen to be fishers of people. Their new vocation, not unlike their old one, will also call them to seek out that which had been heretofore unseen – but this time we are not talking about fish, but rather the heretofore unseen potential of humanity.

And the disciples got very busy in their new vocation. So busy that there was little time for family squabbles. Their eyes were on Jesus such that their passion was not around their own egos or personal preferences, but rather their new found passion became to live the life Jesus called them to. To be bearers of the Good News in both word and deed. To introduce to the world not a new God but rather the God that always been – but more rightly understood. That is to say a God of love, mercy, and compassion; And a God of forgiveness and grace. And I don't know, maybe even a God of simple good manners.

And so Paul writes to a church whose passions have gone astray. A church too concerned with non-essentials. And he is anxious to correct the course for he knows that not only is the peace of the individual saints in jeopardy, but so also is God's one holy, catholic, and apostolic church. And thus is jeopardized the health, progress, and well-being of God's Kingdom here on earth.

It's not that Paul imagined a church without division. But he did imagine, in fact he demanded that the church, brothers and sisters in Christ, keep its eye on the ball; be in agreement that even in times when disagreements arise, the people of the church remain "united in the same mind and the same purpose." And that, dear ones, would be the mind of Christ and the purpose for which he came.

So as we continue to be the church let us keep in mind Paul's words: I appeal to you by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you be in agreement and that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For God's sake, for our own sake, for the sake of the work that is the church, for the sake of our nation, and, in fact for the sake of whole world. Amen.