SO WHY BOTHER WITH THE CHURCH?

I Corinthians 1:10-18; Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, a
January 23, 2011
Stephen R. Montgomery
Idlewild Presbyterian Church

Prayer: Though the winter chills us, O God, come and warm our hearts, challenge our minds, and energize our souls so that we might be alive to your presence and share your love in Jesus Christ. Amen.

“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.”

OK, Paul ol’ buddy ol’ pal. I’m putting you on the committee to choose how to allocate our budget…. Let me know, Paul: Should we put more money into outreach and less into worship? More into evangelism and less into education? More into the building and less into community service? And while I’m at it, I’ll put you in charge of whether we should serve communion by intinction or by passing the elements in the pews.

And you will be on the committee that decides how we refer to God: as Father, Mother, Parent, Creator, Adonai, or just “the higher authority formerly known as God?” And of course, I’ll put you on the food service committee to decide what to have for our First Sunday lunches, our WELL dinners, our More Than a Meal feasts, our Friday morning breakfasts (actually, that’s a no-brainer: scrambled eggs, bacon, and grits! Some things you won’t have to decide.)

And of course we’ll put you on the Stewardship Committee and I’ll even let you preach a rock ‘em, sock ‘em, “give till it hurts” sermon. That’s when the rubber really hits the road. You want to see divisions? Go get ‘em.

Clearly Paul has never spent an extended period of time in a congregation. His goal is simply unachievable. There is no way that we are going to have agreement on everything in this congregation. And I, for one, like it that way. I don’t want to be in a congregation where everyone agrees all the time. Can you imagine how boring that would be? I have told a number of you that my growing edges have always come from people who might be different from me, have different perspectives, different ideas, different experiences, different theologies, different races, different sexual orientations. And you would be amazed at the number of people who join this church and say they specifically want to be in a church where they are challenged intellectually and spiritually, where everyone does not think alike.

I for one like a congregation with a little chutzpah. It’s great when I come out of a worship and someone says “I loved that new hymn. Let’s make sure we sing it more.” And I’ll say “Thanks. I found it and thought you’d enjoy it.” And the next person says “I hate that new hymn. Never sing it again.” And I’ll say “Well, Ted wanted to sing it, so I decided to go along.” That’s chutzpah!
It’s tempting to dismiss Paul as someone who didn’t live in the real world, and certainly not in the real church … until … until I read about some of the stuff going on in the congregation in Corinth, that congregation he started. Oh my….where do we start? There’s prostitution, members suing one another, the Lord’s Supper turned into a country club feast where the wealthier patrons eat first and leave the leftovers to the working crowd; there’s someone having an affair with his father’s wife. The vegans and the carnivores were fussing at one another because they were eating meat offered to idols.

They bickered over circumcision, whether or not it was necessary for an adult Gentile male to undergo the knife (they were more than a little reluctant, you know!) They argued over whether or not to get married because of the imminent return of the Lord. And they had cliques. Did they ever have cliques! “I belong to Paul.” “I belong to Apollos.” “I belong to Cephas.” “I belong to Christ.”

No, Paul knew what it was like, and I sometimes wonder why he didn’t chuck it all and say, “You know, life wasn’t so bad when I was a Pharisee and everyone HAD to think the same thing and do the same thing.”

But read Paul a little closer here and I don’t think he expected everyone to agree on everything — which pictures to put in the parlor, which announcements are important enough to make during worship, what kind of cups to use for coffee (that’s been settled, we’re “green” now!). I don’t think he’s hoping that everyone will have the same opinion about every issue. He’s not looking for a community of robots who think the same way, act the same way, agree on everything.

It turns out we miss something in the translation. “Be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” The Greek word there is also used in a medical context for setting broken bones. It’s used in Mark when the disciples are mending nets. Paul wants the bones to be set in the right places, the net to be mended, the community to be whole. He wants for each member to feel that she has a place, that he has a part that is not only respected but essential to the whole. “Be in agreement” is more like “be together,” “find your place,” “make this your home.”

I marvel at how we have been able to do that here at Idlewild. To be together in our disagreements. To be together in our differences of opinion. To be together in our different understandings of who God is, who God is calling us to be, and what God is calling us to do. And if we are an alive and vibrant, thinking and passionate church, we will never be perfectly at peace with no tensions and disagreements, but we can be, and we are striving to be, a church where everyone finds their place, where the body of Christ has all the bones put in the places where they work out their purpose in concert with the whole.

I know of two stories that help to demonstrate how this can happen, and why we should even bother with being the church when we are so different. After all, many of us come to church wanting simply a little peace, no tensions, no controversies. But that is the peace of the grave, not the peace of Christ.
I have a friend who retired as a minister recently who told me about a church fight he experienced in his very first parish some 40 years ago. The name of the church was the Gratitude Methodist Church. It was a little church of about 100 members. That church had a problem. The problem was that when the new preacher came, he realized that the piano stood between the pulpit and the choir and between the choir and the congregation. (Don’t try to diagram this in your mind, because you’ll get lost somewhere in the narthex.) Suffice it to say, the new preacher wanted the piano moved because he didn’t have eye contact with the choir, and the people in the choir couldn’t see the congregation because that old upright was sitting right there in the middle of everything.

And so one night at the Administrative Board meeting, the board voted to move the piano. We were just going to move it two feet, six and one-half inches, Joe said. “And I didn’t think anything much about it after all. It was my first church and I was wet behind the ears. I didn’t know how people acted in church, so we moved the piano.”

“The next Sunday morning I came to church and Celeste, who played the piano was not sitting at the piano. She was sitting on the last pew of the sanctuary. When I asked her why she wasn’t at her usual post, she said she couldn’t play the piano if it was moved two feet, six and one-half inches. When I asked her why, she said ‘Well, my mother played the piano where it was. My grandmother had played the piano right there, and in fact, my great-grandmother had played the piano there, and I’m not going to play it anywhere else but where it has always been.’

Well, before the preacher knew it, the congregation had gotten divided. Two camps: those who thought it was high time the piano was moved, and those who thought it was high time the piano be moved back to where it was for generations. In fact, they literally divided up. One side sat on one side of the sanctuary, and the other on the other side. The debate raged for sometime until the piano was moved back two feet, six and one-half inches, whereupon Celeste went back to sit where her grandmother and her mother and her great-grandmother had always sat. (We preachers learn that there are some battles that simply aren’t worth fighting!)

Joe reflected on it later: “Not long thereafter, Celeste, the unbending piano player, got cancer. During the course of her illness, which was long and hard, both those who had been opposed to moving the piano and those who were in favor of moving the piano rallied around Celeste. They brought her meals every day. They took care of her family. They mowed her grass, they came to her home and bathed her and changed her sheets and washed them. They did all they could for Celeste because there was something in that little country church that united them that went far deeper than their disagreement over where any piano ought to sit.

See how the church keeps us bound to each other? And what it might mean to be united in the same mind and purpose, to “be together,” to “make this your home?” When the church lives up to its charter and is faithful to its baptismal vows, nothing divides its members.

There is one more example of the church being the church I want to share. There is a church in a small New England city in which a friend attended one Sunday. On this particular day, the minister opened the service by expressing his horror at an incident that had made newspaper headlines that week, the brutal assault of a woman in the city’s park. Then he announced that the
victim, who had survived both rape and being dragged across a highway, was a deacon in that church, and in fact had been mailing cards to homebound church members when the crime occurred. He named the woman and she came forward and spoke. She said simply that as she had endured the attack she felt that her fellow church members were with her, bearing her up, and she thanked them and thanked God for them.

At the most terrible moment of her life, when God must have seemed very far away, trust in God was possible because she knew that others, including those whose cards she had held in her hand, were believing, trusting, and loving God for her, until she was strong enough to do it again for herself, and for them.4

As so many of you know, if you stick with a congregation for better and for worse, sharing your faith when God gives you a lot of it, you will too receive faith from others at the desperate moments when you can’t find your own.

I continue to be so excited about our years ahead here at Idlewild, for there is so much that we are called to do at this stage in our life together, here in the church, in the Memphis community, and around the world. So let’s be on with the challenge, brave to answer the call to commitment. Let us be in agreement and let there be no divisions among us about the big things, but united in the same mind and the same purpose in Christ Jesus, so that we might be a place where…

Rich and poor,
Mud Islander and Germantowner,
Black and white,
Gay and straight,
Republican and Democrat,
Private schooler and public schooler...

— You get the drift —

Where we are free to be who God made us to be—Beloved, and to respect God’s belovedness in one another.

For I invite you all to “be together,” “find your place,” and “make this your home."

Amen.

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1 From a sermon by my friend and former associate Andrew Foster Connors at Brown Memorial Park Avenue church in Baltimore. I am indebted (once again) to him for the development of the first part of this sermon.
2 Ibid.
3 I have heard this story from several people, but this re-telling was from Joanna Adams, “God’s Quarrelsome People,” January 28, 1990. Small world: Don Monteith, a member of our choir and pianist extraordinaire, played that very piano with Celeste years ago!