

Agreeing on Christ

a sermon based on

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

and delivered on

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3rd Sunday after Epiphany (Year A)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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A Mr. Emo Philips tells this story about an encounter he had. He says,

“I was walking across a bridge one day and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. So I ran over and said,

“‘*Stop! Don't do it!*’

“‘Why shouldn't I?’ he said.

“‘*Well, there is so much to live for.*’

“‘Like what?’

“‘*Well, are you religious?*’

“He said, ‘Yes.’

I said, “‘*Me too! Are you Christian?*’

“‘Christian.’

“‘*Me too! Are you Lutheran, Catholic or Protestant?*’

“‘Protestant.’

“‘*Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?*’

“‘Baptist.’

“‘*Wow, me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?*’

“‘Baptist Church of the Lord.’

“‘*Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of the Lord or are you Reformed Baptist Church of the Lord?*’

“‘Reformed Baptist Church of the Lord.’

“‘*Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of the Lord, reformation of 1879, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of the Lord, reformation of 1915?*’

He said, “‘Reformed Baptist Church of the Lord, reformation of 1879.’

I said, “‘*Die, heretic,*’ and pushed him off.¹

If you didn't know or didn't figure it out, Emo Philips is a comedian. That wasn't a true story. Well, maybe it wasn't factual, but it does ring true. Doesn't it?

In 1 Corinthians we hear Paul addressing a church rent by disagreement. What was that disagreement? One says, “I belong to Paul” or “I belong to Apollos” or “I belong to Cephas (that is Peter)” or “I belong to Christ.” (1 Cor 10:12) The next sentence is telling, “Has Christ been divided? Was I crucified for you? Was I baptized for you?” (1 Cor. 10:13) The implication being that neither was Apollos or Peter. So what are you arguing about? Do you owe your salvation to the one who told you about Jesus? Or do you owe it to him and him alone. Do you owe your salvation to the peculiar way that salvation was explained to you?

So he pleads with them by the name of Jesus Christ to agree and to dispel divisions so that they might be “united in the same mind and same purpose.” (1 Cor. 10b) This is where it gets hard. We as human beings don't agree on everything. This might surprise you, we can't even agree on everything in the church. I don't think that's what Paul is calling us to do. He's not calling us to agree on minutiae. Meanwhile, one of the most hurtful disagreements I've witnessed as a pastor was a disagreement over which silk flowers to put out on the table for the women's luncheon; because we know that when they stand ready to enter those pearly gates, St. Peter's going to say, “We were all ready for you, but you went to that church women's lunch with the wrong flowers. So sorry.” As silly as that disagreement was, it was a serious quarrel. There was more to it than the flowers. There had to be. I hope.

¹ <https://www.radford.edu/~ibarland/Public/Humor/religious-jokes.html> (Accessed January 25, 2020)

Some things are really about preferences. Decorations fall into that category. Somethings do matter even if it's not obvious why. Sometimes little things drive us up a wall for important reasons. It bugs me that the light switch over there is marked "stage." It bugs me because this is the chancel not a stage. A stage implies that this is where the action takes place and that you've come to have a show performed for you, that you've come to see what I and Jenny and Scott with the choir will do, instead of coming to meet God so that you can pour out your love thanking Jesus for restoring you with a promise of life and hope. At the same time, that label serves to remind me that someone didn't get it and that I have to be intentional about not making this about me or trying to impress you with my great intellect and fine oration. It reminds me that my role (our role) is to empower you claim the grace that comes through Jesus Christ so that your praises here in this place fill him with joyful confirmation that because of you, the cross really was worth it.

This is what we're called to agree on. We don't have to agree on which translation of the Bible is best for devotion. We don't have to have the same favorite hymn or even musical style. But again, these are preferences. What about more weighty matters?

The church (capital "C") has divided over time for various reasons. The big divisions have been over issues that someone says is essential. The Great Schism between the east and the west, Orthodox and Roman Catholic, was about the role of the bishop of Rome (i.e. the Pope) in the greater church along with disagreement over how to express the relationship of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son. Martin Luther saw corruption in the church and wanted it addressed. By corruption I don't mean dishonesty (although there was that too), but that some of the teachings had strayed from the stated doctrines.

From the beginning there have been heresies. The Docetic heresy of Gnosticism said that because matter was corrupt, the Son could not really assume the form of a man or God would be corrupted; therefore, Jesus just appeared to be human (sort of like a cosmic hologram). This would mean that he didn't really die on the cross. Which would mean he didn't really rise on Easter? This is something that gets to the core of faith, it isn't and wasn't something that we can or could just agree to disagree about. Disagreeing on that is disagreeing about who Jesus Christ is.

In that joke when Emo is trying to talk that man off the bridge, did you notice that he first started trying to find places of agreement and connection? This is what Paul is calling us to do. This is what we as United Methodists are called to do right now when we hear about potential division in our denomination. We're called to agree that God so loves the world and everyone in it. We're called to agree that on the cross God in Jesus Christ took away the power that death and sin have over us.

The color of the paraments while symbolic doesn't really matter. Even for those real disagreements that matter speak to truth beyond preference like how it is that elements of bread and wine – leaven or unfermented – present the body and blood of Jesus Christ, we are called to acknowledge Jesus Christ in those who disagree. We are called to acknowledge not that some specifics don't matter, but that together the body of Christ is strengthened.

Now for a more worldly reflection. It isn't just in the church that we see disagreement. Right now it's on full display in our country. I'm going to make a political statement, here. It bothers me that so much of what our representatives in national and state government do is focused on party victory. It bothers me that Democrats and Republicans are so intent on being ideologically pure that they won't even acknowledge the supposed common goal of serving we the people. As campaigns ramp up and the hubris spreads, we have an opportunity as Christians to set an example for all Americans. We need to get away from the notion that there is a Red America and a Blue America. There's a lot more magenta and violet than either red or blue. There are a

lot more places where we agree than where we disagree. As long as our disagreements are about specifics for a common goal, let us be willing to yield and to support even what we may not think is the best course, because failure is no one's hope. Let us be the people who seek out common ground and point it out, even when we disagree. Again not agreeing to disagree on those things that are important, but recognizing that the world is full of people willing to create division. We can be a beacon for hope in the midst of it all.

Back to our regularly scheduled programming: How do we find agreement? Do we vote on it? Not always and not usually. Several years ago, the church in Kaneville was looking to paint the fellowship hall. It was looking pretty rough and it was the first thing you see entering the church. So how to pick the color? Should we take a vote? There would have been one hundred different suggestions and ninety-nine losers when a choice was made. Instead I invited Alana to pick the colors and not to talk about it to the church. The wainscoting was painted a dark brown (almost black) and the walls a light green. Personally, I was thinking "ugh," but I'd been to Alana's home. She had a knack for decorating.

When the painting was done, many people commented that they wouldn't have chosen those colors. What everyone agreed on, was that it looked good.

We will not always agree on details, even details of faith. Let us agree though on Jesus Christ. To that end let us recite what it is that Christians have agreed on since 325 when leaders from all the churches gathered in Nicaea as we recite the Nicene Creed.