

I Would Rather Die Than Hate You

^{NRS} 1Co 1:10 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 Stephanas; 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.

You know, whenever I start to get worried about the state of the church today, with all of our differences; all of our challenges- it always makes me feel better to go back to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. It's like having one part of your family that's completely dysfunctional. No matter how bad off you are, you can always look over at them and say, well at least I'm not like that. Compared to them, I'm doing all right!

If you're not super familiar with First Corinthians there a ton of problems going on- most of them worship problems. For starters they've given up preaching in favor of gathering together and watching a few folks break into tongue speaking- this kind of unusual, ecstatic act no one really knows what to do with. Paul is great on this- so pastoral. He says, "Yeah, ok. I guess if you have to do that, it's ok...but if one of you is going to be flopping around and babbling, then another one of you has to be interpreting, so the church at least has a clue as to what's going on." And communion- this was a total disaster. Unlike the little memorial that we have today, what my worship professor calls that little thing we do with the freeze dried cubes of bread and shot glasses- they actually

had a real sit down dinner. The problem was that all of the wealthy people who didn't have to work- they were coming early, eating all the food, and getting crocked on all the wine, until there was nothing left when the working folks showed up but fat, drunken elders ready to party...not a pretty sight. But the worst problem- the worst problem is that they'd forgotten why they were even gathering in the first place. The worst problem is they'd forgotten that in spite of all their differences, in spite of all of the things that distinguished them one from the other- underneath all of this there was something far more important and powerful that made them one. There were forgetting that even if they couldn't agree on anything else- they could all agree that in Christ they found grace, and in Christ they sensed God's devotion and love for the world.

This is the context behind Paul's words here. He writes to them saying he knows they are fighting, that he hears they've lost sight of their basic unity and they've started rallying around different leaders. Some were saying they belonged to Paul, other to Apollos, still others to Cephas. And they were losing sight of what held them together. We do the same things today, only we use denominational labels most of the time. I don't know how many times someone has said to me after church, "Oh, I loved your service. I'm Methodist, or Lutheran, but I liked it anyway." Believe me, I'm always grateful when folks say nice things- it's better than the opposite. But there is always a part of me that's sad that we make such a big deal out of these denominational labels that we're honestly surprised when we go to another tradition and have a good experience. Most of us sitting here this morning would be hard pressed to really say what makes Presbyterians distinct, anyway. And I'm curious, anyone here in the last year read anything by John Calvin. Anyone at all? Now, I'm grateful for our tradition. I am. But

way more important than anything that makes us feel different and separate from the rest of God's people is what binds us together and that's Christ, that in him we sense God's love for all.

Well, Paul's response to all this is beautiful- in a series of rhetorical questions he says to the Corinthians and to us, "What? Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Did John Calvin die for you? Were you baptized in Luther's name?" He's trying to help us see how silly it is getting so caught up in our differences we forget we've more in common than we know.

And really, I think this is at the heart of why Paul is such important voice. Paul says something here so troubling and wondrous- Paul is telling us no matter how different and cut off you feel from those around you, and no matter how strange or weird others may appear- if we look hard enough, he says we will find a glimmer of the divine. We will find something maybe not likable, but most certainly lovable.

I want to tell you a story I've never told a church before- this one or any one. It's never seemed like the right time, but I believe it's OK today. It's not a story I'm proud of. Many of you know when I was very young my dad was difficult, my mom suffered with depression, and my brother nearly died in a car accident at 16. Only a few of you know that a few years later, when my brother recovered and re-learned how to read and went to college, he came out to my mom and I as a gay man. Now in most families this would be enormous news, but given all of the stuff thrown our way, this actually didn't seem like such a big deal. My mom struggled a little bit at first- she was worried about his safety and whether he'd be able to find jobs, the things moms worry about. For me,

for whatever reason it didn't bother me in the least. He was my brother who I loved, and I didn't see that this changed anything. What did change for me is how I started to view others who judged my brother even when they hadn't even met him.

As a young and passionate person, it infuriated me that there were people out there in the world who had never met my brother or any other gay or lesbian people but felt the right to dislike them on principle. It struck me that from a purely common sense perspective, if you never met anyone who was gay, a fair minded person would at least adopt a neutral perspective not deciding one way or the other until they at least met a few folks and got to know the community. And then, when I learned more about this community, about the hatred faced by so many young men and woman, hatred from their very own families- well, this affected me deeply, and I began to see the world as very much divided between the "good" people who were open and accepting, and the "bad" people who were bigoted and full of hate. Living in Texas- I was a real party to be around at that time in my life.

This all came to a head for me when I went to Austin for college orientation the summer before I started classes. I had these enormous and unrealistic hopes for college, believing I would in this mecca of tolerance where everybody was there to learn and grow and would be open to different ideas. It started out great. I spent a lot of time with friends from my high school, and met some new people. One of them was named 'Amy Erica' (like 'America' but weirder is how she put it), and she seemed to be even more odd than I was, which was great.

Then, one night we found ourselves sitting in one of the huge auditorium hall rooms we would all come to know and love as first year students where all the RA's were

down on the stage performing skits about life in the dorms. Of course what evening about dorm life would be complete, if it didn't include the requisite "my new room mate is gay" skit. The RA's actually did a masterful job of humorously dealing with a difficult topic. I was impressed. They found themselves in my "good" category.

But then, when the skit was over, and they were asking for questions and feedback from the audience, a tall guy stood up on the other side of the auditorium from me. He started out with what sounded like a question. "I'm just curious," he said. "Aren't you aware that every major religious tradition in the world agrees that homosexuality is immoral and inherently harmful." And a terrible thing happened. I found myself filled with a powerful and dark anger. I became so angry I wasn't even able to hear him speak. I could see him talking. I could see his mouth continue to move. But I was so livid I was physically unable to listen. And then I snapped. Filled with this incredible anger at this person I didn't even know, and filled with this crushing disappointment at how my unrealistic hopes for college were unraveling, I snapped. In the loudest, rudest voice I could muster, I yell out something I won't share. If you were here last week you heard from Dave Backen we try to keep a PG-13 rating around here. So I just shouted it out, and immediately the place fell silent. The RA who had played the gay man looked in my direction and acidically shot back, "Thank you for that warm, if barbaric and idiotic support." I was so ashamed. I could feel my face burning, and this remark sent me tearing out of the room. But as I ran, I remember hearing him then turn his attention to the young man who had been speaking. And I remember hearing his gentle, loving, but firm response telling him whatever his religious views the campus had clear policies regarding treating all students with respect and fairness and that part of the

undergraduate process was learning how to get along not merely with the people you agree with, but the people you don't. And when he said that the entire audience broke out in applause. But all I could do is to get out of there and look for a place to hide.

I spend the rest of that evening alone, walking through the streets around campus, walking under the tower through the humid night over to the LBJ fountain shooting high into the air. What came over me? Who was that shouting out like that? I couldn't believe what I had done. In one moment I became all the things I didn't like in those who hated by brother.

It's taken me some time to reflect on this, but what I had experienced that night was pure, unadulterated zeal. It was the zeal of the young. The zeal of the convert. The zeal of those who are so absolutely sure they are right they have no need for reason and no patience for love of neighbor- for they have everything all figured everything out, and the only thing left for others to do is to get in line. Up until that point I had considered myself to be the exact opposite of guys like the one who I attacked that night- I believed that because I cared about those on the margins, I believed this somehow made me more 'inclusive', more loving. But I saw myself in a very different way that night, in a very unflattering way- I saw that I could be just as shrill, just as intolerant, and just as unreasonable as my so-called closed minded opponents. I realized that night in a profound way that if I wanted to truly loving, that I was going to have to learn how to hold on to my convictions and at the same time how to honor and reason with those coming from a different perspective.

Now, fortunately most of us aren't as much of a drama queen as I was, and still can be from time to time. Most of us don't have shouting matches with perfect strangers across an entire auditorium. Most of us don't suffer from orientation rage. But there's not a person I know who doesn't have to deal with someone in their life- whether in their family or at their office, who knows how to get right under our skin and push us right to the edge. There isn't a person I know who doesn't from time to time feel this Corinthian desire to just write off all these jerks off and just surround ourselves with people we get along with. And one of my pet peeves about religion is the attempt you hear all the time to just pretend this drive isn't all that important, and that if we just tried hard enough we would all just hold hands and get along.

This is what I love about Paul- he writes to the Corinthians because he knows their feelings *are* serious. The Corinthians are really upset- they do not like each other. And he doesn't tell them just to kiss and make up or to just be friends. Did you notice what he tells them to do? He tells them to be in agreement only in that *they are united in the same purpose*. I think this is fantastic. He basically acknowledges here that they may not like each other and there may not be a day where all the Corinthian churches sing kumbaya. But! But, he says, they need to grow up and remember that in spite of their differences they are all still doing the work of God. Maybe they're doing it in different ways, maybe they're serving different communities- it doesn't matter. They are still serving, and at the very least they owe one another the respect this common ministry deserves.

The good news of this text is that we may not like everyone out there. That's ok. What makes us Christian isn't whether we like one another, what makes us Christian is

whether we're willing to lay down our hatred and fear and treat not just the people we like but the people we don't like, with respect and as if they have something to offer the world by virtue of them being children of God and icons of Christ however much we may be unable to see it.

I'll leave you with the words of someone who figured out how to do this better than almost any other- a man we celebrated this week, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The day before he was shot dead, he preached in Montgomery, Alabama in the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church on the sermon on the mount where Christ commands us to love not just our friends, but our enemies, too. And at the end of this sermon King said this: "So this morning, as I look into your eyes and into the eyes of all of my brothers in Alabama and all over America and over the world, I say to you: 'I love you. And I would rather die than hate you.'"

I love you. And I would rather die than hate you.

I don't have the chance to go back in time and do that summer night in Austin over again. There are no do overs in life. But if I had the chance, I'd like to think today I might have the grace to wait until after the session let out, and then to approach him one on one, and share my views with him that way. And then, even if we couldn't find accord- I could still walk away not having added more hatred to a world that has enough.

Beloved, Christ is not divided. So let us be when possible, honest always, and in everything we do avoid adding hatred to a world that already has more than enough.

Amen.