

United in Good News Foolishness

Joshua 24: 14-27 1 Corinthians 1: 10-18

We are always striving for unity because we know we can do so much more when we're together on something than when we're divided. On the flip side, when we're divided, we're easier to isolate and pick off.

Herds are nature's way of grouping animals for common protection. More eyes and ears can sense danger and respond. The one who strays from the herd becomes an inviting target in their isolation.

What brings people together in unity? The tragedy of 9-11 came after one of the most divisive elections in US history. It served to unite the nation, awakening the civilized world to its vulnerability to ruthless, horrific terrorism. Yet not long after, the nation became divided once more as the Iraq War turned into a quagmire, a war whose justification was built on false pretenses.

With a sorely divided nation on Friday, our new president appealed to patriotism as the remedy. Has there not been enough patriotism? Will more of it overcome the divisions and address the nation's ills? Suffice it to say that I wish him success for the good of our nation and its need for healing.

Uniting around ideals and the fuzzy things they represent can be rather difficult. Patriotism is one of those fuzzy ideals. It represents very different things to different people. Defending the nation from **external** threat and harm is a typical means of esteeming patriotism, but not the only one, of course. Defending the nation from **internal** threat and harm can be a whole different matter. Chances are that defending from an internal threat involves people in positions of power. In this country, where some segment of "we, the people" put them in power, there are going to be folks who are upset when another segment of "we, the people" confront them about their excesses and abuses of power. Both segments of "we, the people" are patriots, but suddenly there is division about what that patriotism really means. It's one thing when it's your guy, but another when it's the other guy.

It's pretty much the same when we come to religion, faith, and belief. There are Jews, Christians, and Muslims. But these groups aren't quite the from the same mold. In fact, in Islam, Sunnis and Shi'ites have been at each others' throats for centuries. In Judaism, orthodox Jews and every other Jew have been at odds. And in Christianity, there are all kinds of Christians and then there are Southern Baptists.

We might say in an off-handed kind of way that, well, Christians are all about the same thing. Of course, that isn't the case at all. If it were true, then there wouldn't be so many different kinds of Christian churches. And once we admit that, then we'll also have to admit that all these churches have very different ways of understanding the dynamics of Christian faith and belief.

So just what does it mean to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus? And just what does it mean to be faithful to God and his Kingdom? It definitely means certain things, and definitely excludes a whole lot of other things. Sorting that out has been the task. What we see in all of this is not a whole lot of unity, but a bewildering amount of division. As we noted in the beginning, we can get a whole lot more done when we're unified than when we're divided. And we become susceptible to threats and dangers, inviting targets for exploitation by those in the world who are conformed to it and not to the Kingdom.

Joshua succeeded Moses as leader of the Hebrew people, and led the conquest of the Promised Land. Here in chapter 24, an aging Joshua is getting ready to hang up his sword and staff. He gathers the elders among the people and is confronting them. Joshua is at that age when he doesn't mince words. He isn't too happy about the way things have developed.

He's aware that they've drifted into worshipping other gods, probably mixing in these local gods with the worship of the God of Abraham, or vice versa. 'Ah, it's all kind of the same thing,' they may have been saying to themselves. Well, Joshua disagrees. We pick up his speech as he comes to his conclusion.

Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

They protest this accusation that they'd serve other gods: *Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods.* If we were to peer into Joshua's mind at this point, he would surely be regarding the twelve leaders and saying to himself: "Weenies." They dutifully recount all that the Lord had done for them, just as Joshua had stated. They conclude: *We, too, will serve the Lord because he is our God.*

Joshua responds to their declaration saying: *You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.*

They continue their protest: *No! We will serve the Lord.* To that, Joshua orders them: *Now then, throw away the foreign gods that are among you, and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.*

Well, the weenie elders don't come out and say that they'll throw away their foreign gods. That would be admitting that they possessed them. Instead they reaffirm: *We will serve the Lord our God and obey him.*

If you keep reading, you'll see that Joshua was so **un**-impressed with their avowal of faithfulness that he set up a stone to memorialize the occasion and serve as a lasting reminder of the promises made. No, I don't think the weenie elders ever threw away the foreign gods.

Joshua wanted them united in faith conviction and practiced devotion to God's ways in order to face together the ongoing dangers and threats in their path. It was faithfulness to the One God that had gotten them freed from Egypt, traversing the wilderness, and into possession of the Promised Land. Honoring the One God with their complete devotion seems the only answer for Joshua, and the only way that this people would prosper and be blessed going forward.

The way of the One God was not the way of other gods and other peoples. I'd imagine that the people liked certain aspects of what these other gods offered, and they liked having a faith practice that wasn't at odds with the culture that surrounded them. Relaxing things in the faith department allowed for better relations, favorable marriages, and other benefits. So, selectively assimilating into the prevailing culture must have seemed like a natural and even beneficial thing to do.

Joshua would have none of it. Faith in God is not to be compromised. There is a reason they have this special faith in One God, and the leaders have neglected it.

For the people around Joshua who were coming to terms with new living conditions, being in the Promised Land and being among peoples of different cultures, that sorting process was happening. The problem was that the elders were making huge mistakes by watering down their faith and practice, and mixing in elements that were simply problematic distractions and distortions.

There was a new living situation for the folks in the new church in Corinth that was established by the apostle Paul. There were likely some Jews as well as plenty of Gentiles. They had a lot to negotiate and navigate between them as they all tried to come to terms with what this new faith and practice would mean for them.

However, Paul was not the only one to come into Corinth and bring a message of a particular faith and practice. In 1st Corinthians, we find out quickly that there has been quarreling, and divisions have formed within the faith community in Paul's absence. He appeals to them in his letter to be "perfectly united in mind and thought."

The report has people saying that they follow Paul, or Cephas, or Apollos, or Christ. Paul is clearly disturbed that they've aligned themselves with human actors and agents, even himself. They're missing the point and causing factions to emerge.

We can speculate about what some of what these differences are. Cephas is the Hebrew name for Peter, so those folks are likely insisting on more Jewish practices. Apollos is known from Acts to have been a follower of the late John the Baptist, so he has added whatever specific Baptist beliefs there may have been, and those beliefs may not have included much about Jesus. Scholars think that Paul threw in "Christ" just for a mocking good measure. In any case, they've compromised the one thing that should be uniting them and focusing them in their ministry together. They've let the distractions become the priority and neglected what should really be their concern.

So, what should they be focused on?

After chastising them – *Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?* – Paul returns to what this ministry and this faith is all about. He writes:

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to proclaim the gospel, and not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

Proclaiming the gospel power of the cross is Paul's mission. They are to live in the power of the cross, the boldness of faith that denies the power of death with life itself – 'the saving power of God.'

However, this isn't the popular message that we Christians living 2000 years later might imagine. It is seen by those around them as "foolishness." The world regards the ways of Jesus followers as foolish. Note how Paul eschews "human wisdom," the common understandings, and accepted beliefs and practices of the world.

If church folks went around spouting things like Jesus is quoted as saying in the gospels, then it's no wonder that it was regarded as foolish. A quick read of the Sermon on the Mount will tell you that. It's nutty, all this stuff about blessings for those who hardly seem deserving, forgiveness and turning the other cheek, love for enemies, having treasures in heaven, not on earth, being unconcerned about all the things that concern the world. It's all foolishness to those in the world whom they're encountering.

The good news **is** a heaping helping of foolishness. The mere fact that we have a Savior who was crucified would have been affront enough. Yes, we have a Savior who was executed by the government. What kind of Savior is that? Taking up one's own cross and dying with Christ in order to serve him and his Kingdom? This isn't a message that's going to play well in the streets.

And this isn't a message that plays very well in today's society either. We love our Jesus, but that gospel is a bit much. Yet it is this gospel of good news foolishness that should be our singular focus. Instead, we're all about a multitude of distractions. These distractions are so effective that we have emptied the gospel of its power to transform ourselves and our experience of life. We have taken away the sharp edge of the gospel and turned it into butter knife, a collection of thoughtful sayings and theological positions. We aren't transformed; we're massaged. Each one gets what they want and misses the point. When the gospel ceases to be God's word of foolishness, we need to check again because we're dividing ourselves from God's promise and new life in Jesus, our Lord and Savior.