

Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Subject: Founding of the Church at Corinth

Theme: What Unites Us

Fifth Sunday of Easter; May. 10, 2020, Online Worship; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and the Risen Lord Jesus, Amen.

Growing up, I lived about an hour North of Miami, so it would make sense that I became a fan of the Miami Hurricanes football team. My Grandfather and my uncles were fans, and so when I had the chance to watch a college football game they became my team. As I prepared to go to college myself, I never even considered attending Miami. The tuition was too expensive, and most of my classmates had chosen one of the other schools, either the University of Florida, or Florida State. Now there are differences between these institutions, they have different strengths, and as football is an important part of the culture at each, and with Tallahassee just a 2 hour drive from Gainesville, they are bitter rivals. The winner of the game every year on the Saturday after Thanksgiving becomes the proud owner of bragging rights. To be on the winning side felt powerful. I chose FSU, and the Seminoles were my team. We boasted of National Championships in 1993, 1999, and 2013. No one else from my family, except maybe my Aunt Kathy, would dare root for the Gators.

Truth be told, when I began college it all made no difference to me. I had friends at UF as well as other state schools, like University of Central Florida in Orlando, and FAU closer to home in Boca Raton. But by the end of my time at college, I wondered to myself why anyone would ever think of wearing orange and blue. The combination of these colors became patently offensive to me, and to this day, if we take the kids out to a restaurant, when the server brings kids menus and crayons, the pairing of orange and

blue shall not be tolerated at our table. It's ridiculous, I know. But it became a part of me. It's all in good fun, we might say, just a joke, but it's really not. Yes, I have friends who watch the Gators play, and I've even welcomed them into my home, but there was gator tail on the menu that evening - a not so subtle signal of my true feelings.

Maybe a college football rivalry is an innocuous example of the divisions among us. It does little harm, most of the time, but those Gator fans could be downright mean to visiting rivals who came to the swamp for a game. They'd key your car, throw a bottle, or pop a tire. While visiting fans were treated with great hospitality when they came to our town, I'm mostly sure. There are divisions, rivalries, and prejudices that cause more harm, that keep us and ones we love from being the people we were made to be, and in fact have led to the death of those on the receiving end of violence produced by hatred. It happens far too often. This week outrage over the vigilante killing of Amaud Arbery, a 25-year old black man in Georgia, finally led to the arrest of a father and son, who shot the young man while he was jogging. Did they feel powerful? Did they think they knew better? This particular case has captured our attention because of a video that appears to show the two white men shooting Aubrey from their truck, but the deep seated racism, suspicion, and resulting violence are not unique in our nation.

Sadly it is nothing new to us. Why are so many of us willing to accept the death of our siblings of color so easily? What will it take for all of us to come together, and - especially for those of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus - to speak up and stand up against the powers of the world that work to divide us? We are one in Christ Jesus, who was crucified for all, who is risen for all.

Paul wrote to the newly founded church in Corinth, a capital city of the region, full of people from different places, with different religions and backgrounds. There were small groups of mostly gentiles, who would meet as house churches, and perhaps come together at times as a large group. It might have been that as they gathered they rallied around the words of different messengers, some who worked with Paul, and others who shared the good news in different ways at different times. There was Cephas - who you'll know as Peter, Apollos, another preacher or teacher around at the time, and Paul himself, who baptized some or others - he can't quite remember them all. Those who heard had different loyalties to their teachers. We do that too, whether it's a favorite school, a beloved pastor, or a preferred Bible translation. We all have different affinities that become a part of who we are. Paul writes to declare his love for the people in the church, and to remind them that it's not about them in the first place.

Paul doesn't ask them to agree on all the facts and interpretations. He wants them to remain united in one purpose, to be strengthened by one another, not torn apart by division. They were not to be beholden to any earthly leader not to fall in line behind roman authorities, or live like the culture around them that worshipped other gods or none at all. Paul writes to remind this group they are special. They are ones with a mission and purpose. He reminds them that they were claimed in the name of the love of God in Jesus Christ, and called followers of The Way for a reason. For the sake of the faith, for the sake of the church, and for the sake of their own lives, he wanted them to remember that they were one body in Christ Jesus.

We say that a lot. We are the body of Christ. Paul uses this exact phrase later in this letter. He specifically means that church at Corinth, but we are gifted with the same

message, the proclamation of Jesus Christ crucified and risen. All those who hear the message of Christ's love and grace given through the cross, who receive it and believe it are made into the one body, are knit together into one Lord, one faith, one baptism. If you hear that and you believe that, then you are one entrusted with responsibilities to care for the rest of the body. In Christ, we are ALL called to love and serve one another, to give as we are able, to provide for those in need.

But we still divide ourselves. We are all Christians, yet divide ourselves into denominations. Why can we not be of the same mind and worship together, even though we might disagree on some theological points? Even within our own small group of Lutherans we get competitive over who has the highest worship attendance, the nicest buildings, or the biggest offerings. These things are not the main thing. Saint Augustine wrote, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." We might not agree on everything, but *what unites us* is the love of Jesus, His death and resurrection, which are God's saving grace and true freedom for our souls.

Our practices of politics divides us (you didn't need me to tell you that, did you?) and the way we interpret the law, or the leaders we support become the powers that we cling to. This Fall, things may get even more intense, as we face another election with the lingering effects of *the Coronavirus* as the backdrop. We will be pulled one direction or another. We should remember *what unites us*. We are all Americans, entrusted with the right to vote for those who will represent us and more importantly, make decisions that impact the most vulnerable ones in our communities.

We are divided as a city. Here in Las Vegas, as our mayor is arguing with the governor, trucks with flags are driving up the strip, people are armed with guns and

rallying to protest closures of business and the loss of jobs, while others speak out in favor of remaining closed for the sake of our healthcare workers, first responders, elderly neighbors, friends, and family. We might argue about who's scientific research is more credible, or disagree about the level of risk we face, and have different perspectives. We might live in gated communities or apartment buildings or out on the street, but *what unites us* is that we are all neighbors and rely on each other for safety and peace in our city.

We are all human beings. I believe, deep down, we all want the same things. We all want to work, and we want to be assured of a safe working environments. We want to be healthy and be able to provide for the ones we love, and we want to make our own choices. As ones baptized into Christ Jesus, we remember our calling to work for peace and justice in the world and that our choices affect others too. We are entrusted with the calling to share the good news of Jesus in the world. We are called to be a part of the family of faith into which we have been adopted. We aren't perfect and our human nature gets the better of us at times. When we are wrong, we ask for forgiveness, and we forgive one another. We remember we do not live for ourselves but for Christ and our neighbors.

Some of you will recall when there were several Lutheran churches on one block: one Norwegian, one German, one Swedish, one Danish. What a luxury. We don't live in that world anymore. Here, in our community we share a message of God's grace and love for all people. We invite all to hear the Good News, and fully participate in the ministry we share - to serve at Martin's Mart, to feed people at the Senior Meal program, to play music, to read scripture in worship, to help young people be formed in faith, and

to show hospitality to others. Even when we cannot be together in the same place, we show up to share the heart of Christ in the Heart of the City.

We are different people. We are different from the world around us and different from one another. Our uniqueness is a gift. We rejoice that we are NOT united by nationalities, races, sexual orientations, our ages, abilities, degrees, or our political affiliations. We are united by something much more important than these. Our charge as Christians is to remember the main message Paul proclaims. We are united by the Word of God, displayed in the foolishness of the cross.

Yes! The message that God in flesh would take on death itself, bleed and die to bring eternal life for a world that doesn't deserve or accept it is strange and offensive. It is foolish to us. That's not what a champion does. That's not what success looks like to us, and so we look away. We think we know better. We think we are wise. We think we are powerful. We are at times even ashamed to admit we follow one who gave himself to die, who couldn't or wouldn't pull down the walls of the empire and overturn the powers of the world, but died for us, that we would be saved from eternal death, and forgave those who condemned him, that we would be forgiven too, and gifted us with His holy spirit that leads us to love and serve and sacrifice for others.

What unites us is that Word, that cross, that Savior. Jesus comes to us, loves us, forgives us, and scoops us up from our failures and breaks the shackles of our allegiances and affinities, and calls us His own. God's love in Jesus shows us the beauty of that cross, the reality and depth of His love, that has conquered death, hatred, racism, violence, murder, bigotry, and all other sin, once and for all. Christ has united us in Him, made us His family, and forged a bond deeper than any we could ever create.

We are One in Him. We are God's beloved. You are His children. Now and forever,
Amen.