

BELOVED COMMUNITY

Ps. 40:1-11 / 1. Cor. 1:1-9

A while ago, I read the late pastor/theologian Eugene Petersen's "The Pastor: A Memoir." I have always appreciated his wisdom and candor—and sometimes brutal honesty— regarding the calling we share. Among many great passages in the book, I still remember one sentence very clearly because it is true for every pastor. Petersen struggled with a congregation he served and how things did not go exactly like he thought they should. He concluded: "This was not the congregation I wanted but the one into which God placed me." Said differently, there is no such thing as a perfect pastor and there is no such thing as a perfect congregation. We are all simply humans being together in our journey to serve God and one another.

The apostle Paul found himself in a similar predicament as he addressed the faithful in the Greek city of Corinth. The Corinthians were a hot mess. Everybody had at least one opinion.

People fought over right and wrong, over who belonged and who didn't. To say that there were divisions in the Corinthian Church would be an understatement. Paul worried that things would get away from him. In this volatile climate, he came to the same conclusion as Petersen: "You are sanctified in Christ. Your squabbles, tensions, and strife really don't matter in the end. You are saints together with all people in every place who call on God's name. God is their Lord just as much as ours." In other words: "People of Corinth, this may not be the community you had envisioned but remember this: It is not your community—it is God's community and God placed you right smack in the middle of it. What makes you all a holy bunch is the fact that you belong to Christ just as any other community belongs to him which calls on his name."

Wise words from wise teachers. We may want to add a third today—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Back in the 1960s, Dr. King found himself in a situation very much like the apostle Paul. The

congregation he served, his country—our country—was a hot mess. People fought over right and wrong, who could fully participate in communal life and who could not. So Dr. King, in the spirit of Paul’s rallying cry for unity in Christ, called for the creation of “The Beloved Community,” in which everyone is cared for, absent poverty, hunger, and hate. He reminded his contemporaries, and us, that the community of God’s beloved children belongs to all who call on God’s name, no matter their race, color, sexuality or creed. Note, he called for *creating* such a community. It’s not a given.

What unites the apostle Paul, Dr. King, and Eugene Petersen is that they listened to and lived by God’s word. If there were political implications to their prophetic message of unity in Christ it was because they followed God’s word. And we all know how things tend to end for those who speak prophetic words on God’s behalf to God’s people.

God placed these spiritual leaders in situations where they needed to create order out of chaos. A new Genesis, if you will. It seems to me that you and I find ourselves in such a place as well in our current cultural context. And I don't think I have to spell this out for us. A few years ago, 21 wise elders in our midst decided to become a *Matthew 25* congregation with three goals: Being a vital community at worship; striving to alleviate poverty; helping to break down systemic racism.

This is not a new endeavor for Ladue Chapel. There is historic precedent with our founding pastor, Dr. David McDowell, and with Rev. Elden McKie, in the late sixties. These two colleagues of ours went to Birmingham, AL to register black voters. There were squabbles, tensions and strife in this congregation about their actions—but their actions did not rend this church asunder. Rather, it strengthened it into the body of Christ we are today because they followed the apostle Paul's urging plea for peace and justice for all people who call on God's name.

We also have a physical reminder of this call to Christian unity in our stained glass window in *Woods Chapel*, crafted by Emil Frei's world-renowned stained glass company in Kirkwood. The window depicts the gospel text of Matthew 25. It is the familiar parable where the disciples ask the king/Jesus: "When did we see you go hungry, or thirsty or homeless or sick or in prison?" And he replies: "Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." We may not live in "The Beloved Community" just yet. But it is a community into which God placed us and where "God is their God just as much as ours."

Last week, we celebrated *The Baptism of the Lord* and we had an opportunity to remember our own baptism. We came forward to pass by the font once again, we were marked with the sign of the cross, and we were called to give thanks for "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in all." Other than death which awaits us all, I

know of no other life events than the Lord's Supper and baptism which remind us that we are all equal in God's eyes.

We may struggle with the congregation into which God placed us. We may struggle with the country into which God placed us and in which we strive constantly for an ever more perfect union. We may struggle with our own family into which God placed us when we were born. But no matter our struggles, these are the communities into which *God* placed us. These are the communities which God asks us to create ever anew as "beloved communities" in the spirit of unity—the unity of equals as beloved children of God, baptized into Christ's death and resurrection to new life one and all in the power of God's Holy Spirit.

Hear again the words of the apostle Paul: ""You are sanctified, made holy, in Christ. Your squabbles, tensions, and strife really don't matter in the end. You are saints together with all people in every place who call on God's name. God is their Lord just as much as ours. ... And 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 knit together in the same mind and the same purpose as our Lord Jesus Christ.”

May it be so. For you, and for me. Amen.

Rev. Dieter U. Heinzl, PhD

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church (USA), St. Louis, MO

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