

“The Tie that Binds”

One of my favorite games when I was a boy was kickball. I don't know if kids still play this game but in my day it was the go-to team sport. Kickball is like baseball but with no bat, played with your feet and with one of those bouncy, thick, rubber balls. Back in the day, if you wanted to test your personal athletic skill against a single player, you'd go to the tetherball pole (another game I'm not sure kids still play or even know about) but for an outdoor team sport it was kickball. The playground at my elementary school had a kickball court painted directly on the blacktop and nearly every recess we'd choose up sides, and we'd play to win. I casually refer to “choosing up sides” like it was no big deal but let's be clear, choosing sides was one of the most anxious moments of the day for any kid. First, the decision was made about who the captains would be. This was usually obvious because the captains were always the best players. They were the strongest and fastest and they were assertive enough to just say, “I'm a captain,” doing so with such confidence no one else dared put up a challenge. The other kids, who weren't as big or fast or confident, would line up against the brick wall of the school building and wait to be chosen. Sometimes we had a pretty good idea who was going to win that day simply because of who the captain was, and if a strong captain got the first pick the winning felt even more certain. Players were chosen one at a time, alternating from one team to the other. Again, it was the strongest and best players who were chosen first. I suppose this was a precursor to the professional sport's draft of today, where there is great honor and financial reward from being chosen in the first or second round. We would stand at the wall and wait for our names to be called. Some kids were so anxious they'd throw their hands up into the air and say, “Choose me. Choose me.” As it turned out, this was not the best strategy. If you were so “needy” as to cry out to be chosen it probably meant your ability was not strong enough to speak for itself. Those kids, no matter how much they begged to be noticed, were often chosen last. Of course, this was what every one of us dreaded, being the last one chosen. If you were last that meant there really wasn't any choosing of you at all. The last one joined a team because there was no other option. Back in the day, we didn't have the loser label like we do now. You know, the big “L” on a person's forehead that lets the world know who they are. We didn't do the “L” thing as kids, but everybody knew who the losers were. It's funny to think about it now. Kickball was just a game we played but I think there were deeper things going on. We were just kids, but what some experienced when we “chose up sides” may have left a mark for life.

As we mature, we discover how the process of “choosing sides” is not really child's play. We do it our whole lives and it's the very thing the Apostle Paul came up against in the early church. There were divisions in the Corinthian congregation because its members aligned themselves with particular leaders. They chose sides, formed groups, one group against the others, and in the process turned what should have been a fellowship in Christ into a competition of winners and losers. Sometimes when we read the bible we struggle to interpret what it is saying. We wonder how those ancient words can be relevant in our time. There is none of that kind of struggle with our passage for this morning. We are reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians but he could just as easily have attached his letter to an email and sent it to the leaders of the United Methodist Church. Our denomination continues its theological debate over interpretation of scripture and human sexuality. As happens in any conflict, Methodists have formed into groups, choosing sides with folks who are like-minded. This is not surprising, it's human. Each of us has a point of view about these matters. In fact, we have opinions and ways of thinking about many subjects and issues of our day. We aren't “cookie cutter” people. We have different ways of understanding the world, even different ways of understanding God, and we find comfort and confidence in pulling together with those who see it like we do. The Apostle Paul is sometimes misunderstood regarding the differences between people. He did not say that all of us must think exactly the same way or even believe the same way. What Paul preached is that in spite of our differences there is an overarching reality that embraces us all. That reality is Christ. Christ, a gift of God. Christ, the embodiment of grace. Christ, a love that is eternal and connects to everyone. Before we decide the specific way we will think or live, teaches Paul, we are together in Christ.

Let's come at this from another side. Let's agree with Paul that we have unity in Christ but that does not mean the differences among us are unimportant. The person who is different from me, the person who thinks differently from me, the person whose theology challenges me, may be the person who helps me grow in my Christian life. When God is working in us our minds can be changed. When God is involved, hearts can be transformed. Yes, God's love accepts us as we are, but God's love is also powerful enough not to leave us the way we are. It is the love of God that can heal or soften hard attitudes and it is the love of God that challenges hurtful assumptions. The apostle Paul knows, just as we do, that we see things differently. Paul also knows, as we do, that God is working in us for what is life-giving and good. The issue in the Corinthian church and the concern in the

United Methodist Church; in fact, the problem wherever people gather and segregate themselves; is how our differences can erode into destructive conflicts where the only concern is who wins and who loses. Paul writes to the Corinthians as if to say, "You're better than that. In fact, God is working in your lives so you will be more than that." Before we choose up sides, Paul wants us to be clear that God has already chosen us in Christ. And so, before we give ourselves to anyone or anything, we give ourselves to Christ. Paul names this teaching in another letter that he writes to a different congregation. He writes, "For there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. For you are all one in Christ..." (Gal.3:28) If Paul were to write this letter in our day he very well may have said, "there is no longer progressive or traditionalist, gay or straight, conservative or liberal. When we are in Christ, we are in Christ." And, Paul puts a period right there.

I think the apostle knew his words might not be enough to overcome the divisions in the church. For this reason, Paul points to what has the power to overcome all things, the cross. Oh, what faithfulness Paul invites us to consider. It's not about him, and it's not about any of the other leaders and their positions. The focus is the cross, because what God does through the cross transcends any barrier that would limit its reach. As Christians, we tend to think of the cross mostly as a symbol of what Jesus did long ago. We look back at the cross and we thank Jesus that he took everything on for us and died there for our sake. Jesus made right what was broken in us and we are grateful. Now, gratitude has its place but only being thankful doesn't tap the depth of the cross's power in our lives. Paul sees the cross as a sign that God's love is shaping us now. We belong to Christ. We belong to the way of the cross, which means the love and mercy of Jesus is shaping the way we think and act, and the way we speak, and how we live with each other.

My invitation this week is to put in place a life shaped by the cross. To help us with this, there is a word I want to lift up to this morning. That word is "cruciform." (A slide is displayed with the phrase "The cruciform life.") This isn't a familiar word but its meaning is rather straightforward. A cruciform life is a life shaped by the cross. The challenge this week is to allow our attitudes, our loyalties, our theologies, and every other way that we think to first be formed by the love and mercy of Christ. We are not called to be uniform in our thoughts but we are called to be cruciformed in our lives. Someone is different than me: "What do they look like through the cross?" Someone disagrees with me: "What does the cross have to say to them and to me?" Someone is in a different group than I am or chooses the other side: "How does the cross provide a way for us to be connected in spite of our differences?"

When I began today, I noted how left out the last one chosen must have felt. Jesus had something to say about the first and the last, you know. His words are always about the cross, and the life he gives leaves a mark on us that lasts forever. Amen.