

The Fellowship of the Lamb (1 Corinthians 1:1-9)

2 Epiphany

January 15, 2017

Dear Friends in Christ,

If you and I were roommates, would we still be talking to each other? Set gender aside for the moment. But if you and I spent that much time in the same place, would we still be friends? Maybe we'll get back to that later.

I. A Brief Trip Back to the Jordan, Then Off to Corinth...

Today's Gospel lesson takes us right back to where we were last week: standing on the banks of the Jordan River. We hear it this time from the Gospel of John. It's the same bunch of sorry sinners as last time. They're from all of Judea, and they're no doubt a vast collection of different types of people. And among them, we note again that the eternal Son of God is present in the flesh. Now, this is the reason for our visit back to the Jordan again today: in our Gospel lesson, Jesus is revealed to be the Savior. But how? Does He have an aura of authority or dignity about Him, as portrayed in many films? Is He a foot taller than everyone else, better looking or glowing with divine power? How do the people there know that He is the Savior? They know the same way people know today: someone tells them. John declares, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" See, true to Old Testament prophecy (Is. 53:2), He has no form or majesty that they should look at Him, and no beauty that they should desire Him. The Son of God has become so human that He stands in the crowd, unremarkable, until John says, "Behold—the Lamb of God!"

That is an important point to keep in mind for later. Here is another: because Jesus is there, this crowd of penitent sinners has something in common besides sin. Each needs a Savior, and He is the one Savior for them all. That means that all there who trust in Him are all His people, His redeemed. Some don't have one savior, while others have another. They are joined together, as one people, by Him..

Keep that in mind, for now we must hurry off to Corinth in our epistle for today. There, we find a gathering of Christians; and if you're looking for a low-maintenance, trouble-free group of believers who have it all together...well, you had better keep on looking. This is a congregation of converts from a pagan society in a multicultural, international city; and while they have—by God's grace—repented of their sin and believed in Jesus, they still have plenty of problems. In this epistle, Paul will write to them about their bickering and divisions, how some are wearing "Team Paul" T-shirts, while others have opted for "Team Apollos." He'll have to correct them where some tolerate intimacy outside of marriage and others deny it within. He'll have to speak to them about lawsuits, as some Christians there are suing others. He'll have to correct them about bullying the weak in faith, and speak to those who are bellyaching about whether or not to pay the preacher. He'll have to speak correctively about pride and idolatry and doubt about the resurrection of Jesus. Let's be clear: St. Paul doesn't write this letter to the pagans down at the bar. He's writing to the congregation of believers, and all of these are problems in their midst.

Personally, were I called to be the pastor of that group in Corinth, I might be studying Jonah to see where his escape attempt went wrong. Not Paul. In fact, as he begins this letter by inspiration of the

Holy Spirit, what does he call this divided, bickering, lawsuit-loving, bullying, messed-up group of people? He calls them a fellowship, a communion. He calls them “saints together.” He calls them—get this now—he calls this bunch of clearly troubled, disagreeable sinners the “Church of God.”

What does this mean? Maybe it’s like a business opening a new office. The local help is crude; but if that’s what you’ve got to work with, that’s what you’ve got. Maybe Paul is trying to start a franchise of Christianity in Corinth, and he’s been forced to lower the bar: “These folks don’t live up to what we’re looking for; but if we’re going to have a presence in this city, I guess they’ll have to do.” Don’t believe that for a moment. The Lord doesn’t operate that way. He doesn’t bring people into His kingdom by lowering His standards. Instead, He raises sinners up to holiness by His grace, by His merit.

And that is what’s going on here. This group in Corinth, largely adult converts from immoral paganism, has arrived in God’s kingdom with a lot of heavy baggage. There will be memories of dirty past dealings and recollections of seductive sins. As long as they’re in this world, they’re going to struggle with temptation. They’re not always going to get along. When there’s a disagreement, it will be easy to go back to how they once were, to file a lawsuit or throw a punch.

In other words...they’re sinful. But while these sinners might not like each other or understand each other, they still share this in common: they are God’s Church in that place because Jesus is their Savior. It’s not because of how well they’ve conquered their vices or how well they get along with one another. It’s not because of who THEY are. It’s because of WHOSE they are.

So Paul reminds them that they are the Church. They are sanctified in Christ Jesus. He has died and risen again to take away their sins, to make them holy. Clearly, they’re not holy by their own righteousness—they prove that every day. But because of Jesus, they’re called to be saints together. God has given them all forgiveness for Jesus’ sake, Paul says. When they speak, they speak enriched by Him in all speech and knowledge; and where they fail and speak sinfully, they repent and are forgiven. While their thoughts, words and deeds are lacking so much in Christian charity, they are not lacking in any spiritual gift. Why? Because the Savior is there. As those people wait for Jesus to be revealed in glory, He is there to sustain them to the end, guiltless. He is there by His Word, proclaimed by Paul and others. He is there in His Supper, to forgive and strengthen. He is faithful. He’s made them a fellowship, a communion in Him. The world—in fact, you and I—might look at them at first and say, “What a sad group of disagreeable cranks.” That might all be true. But that’s not what Jesus calls them: He calls them a fellowship. He calls them His body. He calls them His people—holy, redeemed and forgiven.

II. ...and On to Edmonton

Moving on to Edmonton, I pose this question: if you and I lived in the same house, would we still be talking? See, I’m willing to admit that I’m far more likeable from a certain distance, after I’ve had a chance to have a cup of coffee and gather myself in the morning. Were we around each other in close quarters most of the time, we might NOT get along so well. Naturally, with my effervescent personality and superior sense of humor, it wouldn’t be my fault.

That’s true, more or less, for all of us. Many best friends in high school try to be college roommates, and they end up no longer friends. They discover how different they are when it comes to sleeping habits, eating habits, study habits, social habits and more. Differences can go a long way to divide.

We're a diverse group here at Redeemer. Age-wise, we run the gamut from children to elderly. We like different foods. We listen to different music. We go different places. We have different personalities and different ways of approaching problems. Some like a particular hymn; some do not. Some were baptized as babies, while others entered the faith as adults. We have a wide variety of people here. It may be true that we don't have a lot in common. We don't all hang out together, at the mall or at the hall. We may not even particularly like each other.

So why are we here, under the same roof? Because the Lord has united us in this: here, in this place, we are a fellowship in Christ. We're a communion in Him. We His body, His family. Called, gathered, enlightened and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, that's why we are here.

Not all churches teach that. There's a philosophy, put into words by a man named Schleiermacher, that says that a church is a group of like-minded individuals. In other words, a group gets together and says, "We like each other and we think the same. We'll all agree on what we have in common, and that will be what we believe." But that isn't how God puts His Church together. He says, "You don't decide among yourselves what to believe, wondering if it's in the ballpark. I give you My Word, and by it I gather you in. I will have My people for Jesus' sake, and I number you among them."

There's the idea, too, that a communion is all about the people. In fact, Holy Communion is taught in some churches as being mostly about people getting together as they celebrate their friendship with one another. But you can have people together just about anywhere, at Tupperware parties or football games. What makes you a holy communion, a fellowship, is that you are here in Christ, because Christ is here with you. He gathers you in by Baptism. He speaks His Word to you. He feeds you with His own body and blood in His Supper—in that Holy Communion with Him. In fact, do not let this pass you by: what will you sing before the Supper this day? "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world..." You'll sing what John the Baptist declared when he pointed out the Savior. Why? Because the Savior is here, just as present, in His Word and Sacrament. Like then, today He once again appears in a form so ordinary that many would pass Him by. But He is here, body, blood and all. The Communion is with Him: He has told you so. And as those who have publicly confessed unity in His saving doctrine, you are part of His fellowship here.

Dear members of Redeemer, you are a communion, the fellowship of the Lamb in this place. You have been sanctified and made holy by the Son of God, who died and rose for you. So while you are a diverse lot, this defines you as the people of God in this place.

Where there may be disagreements, there is to be no quarreling. There are two kinds of offenses among the people of God: there are those that are slight enough that you simply overlook them. And there are those big enough that you seek to be reconciled with your brother or sister. Let it go, or be reconciled; but among that body of Christ, there is no room for grudges or grumbling. Where you find yourself grumbling over some offense, repent. Then go and be reconciled, for you are the family of God.

Where there is disagreement on decisions in the church—financial matters, administrative matters, and the like, we address those honestly and forthrightly. There will be disagreements along the way about such management matters, and we want to work wisely and respectfully. But our conduct in

such matters is this: we are the fellowship of Christ in this place, proclaiming His Gospel now and preserving it for those who will follow us.

Where there is need, there is caring. Time and time again, I am warmed by so much that is done quietly, behind the scenes, at every church I've served, and also here at Redeemer. I often arrive at a hospital room or other place of need to find that I am not the first to arrive, nor will I be the last. For this I give thanks. And where we fail to care as we ought, or could do more, we repent. And we rejoice that we are the Lord's, forgiven and sanctified.

Where there is the need to support the Church, there is mutual sacrifice. You do not leave it to others to support the family, but each is to give as he is able from what God has given Him.

And where we fail to do so out of selfishness or greed or misplaced priorities, we repent and rejoice that the Lord does not withhold the riches of His grace from us.

You are the Church in this place, the communion in Christ, the fellowship of the Lamb. Look around society today: where else will you find a gathering so diverse, yet one that remains together? The closest you find, I think, would be a family, which only makes sense. You are the family of God. You are united because Christ, the Lamb of God, is here with you. Whatever differences you may have, you hold in common this eternal joy with your brothers and sisters here: you are the fellowship of the Lamb, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen