

Net-casters, Net-menders, and Networks

A sermon based on 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 and Matthew 4:12-23

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A young rabbi new to his congregation discovered a serious problem on his first Sabbath with them. At seminary the young rabbi had studied theology and was a good Hebrew scholar. A progressive seminary, it had also taught him courses in group dynamics, systems theory, and the like, but nothing prepared him for his first Sabbath with this congregation. During the first service, half of the congregation stood for the prayers and the other half remained seated. The young rabbi thought this a bit strange, but he didn't say anything. The next week, however, the same thing happened! Again, the third week, so after the service he asked one of the men who had stood for prayer, "What is the tradition at this synagogue? Do we stand or sit for prayers?" The man seemed irritated by the question and said in no uncertain terms that the tradition in this synagogue was to stand for prayers. Feeling the man a tad too belligerent in his response, he asked the same question of one of women who sat during prayer. Surprised by his question, she replied, "Why, the tradition of this synagogue since the earliest days has been to remain seated during prayers."

Quite confused, and not prepared to let sleeping dogs lie, sit, or stand, the young rabbi sought out the founder of the congregation. Visiting him in a nearby nursing home, the young man asked the elderly and somewhat forgetful rabbi, "You know this congregation well, Rabbi. Tell me, is it the tradition of the congregation to sit during the prayers?"

"No," replied the old rabbi, he didn't think that was the tradition. "Well, sir, then it's the tradition of this congregation to stand during prayer?"

"No," the old rabbi didn't think that was the tradition either. Quite perplexed, the young Rabbi cried out: "Well, what is the tradition? These people are driving me crazy. We have half the people sitting, half the people standing -- they seem to be a very disagreeable and divisive lot."

"Ahh," replied the old rabbi, "that is the tradition."

A Plethora of Corinthian Loyalties

It's a long, if dishonourable, tradition, but its roots can be traced as far back as the New Testament! A quarrelsome spirit is very apparent in our reading from 1 Corinthians. It's apparent, for example, in Paul's opening appeal: "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 united in the same mind and the same purpose." (1 Corinthians 1:10) Not content to leave it with a lofty appeal Paul quickly gets into the specifics, saying, "...it has been reported to me...that there are quarrels among you.... What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to

Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." (1:11-12) "Has Christ been divided?" asks Paul. (1:13)

Taking into account that this is found in the first chapter of only the second epistle in the New Testament, it's not particularly encouraging. Our own tradition has often prided itself on being a restitutionist church, meaning we have given higher priority to restoring the New Testament church than to current tradition. And in many ways our tradition, no stranger to schism, has managed, time and time again, to restore Corinthian divisiveness!

William Barclay, a student of the New Testament, speculates as to the nature of the Corinthian divisions, saying that those who claimed to belong to Paul were probably Gentiles who had found the gospel of Christian freedom so exciting that they were not always cognizant of liberty's limits!

The party who claimed to belong to Apollos may have been people attracted to his eloquence and Scriptural knowledge. Apollos came from Alexandria, a centre of intellectual activity where scholars could make exceedingly complex constructions out of the simplest things. They had made a science of allegorizing the Scriptures and intellectualizing the faith.

The party that claimed to belong to Cephas were most likely Jews, with deep loyalty to the Jewish law and its strict observance. Their high view of law placed severe limits upon grace.

Then there were those who claimed to belong to Christ. There may have been such a group, or it could possibly be a sardonic comment of Paul intended to accent their misguided loyalties. A little like the little boy who turned down an invitation to worship with a friend's family, saying, "I belong to a different abomination."

Whatever the nature of the various factions in the Corinthian congregation, it is clear that their congregational life had serious flaws and fissures running through it that inhibited and eroded their unity in Christ. As one pundit once said, "The time for action is past! Now is the time for constant bickering!"

Improving upon the Corinthian Tradition?

Unfortunately, the Corinthian quarrelling tradition has had more than its share of devotees. Though Christ said that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20), the Church has improved Corinthian quarrelsomeness to the extent that where two or three are gathered in Christ's name there are often at least four or five loyalties! One student of Christian history said that if a single believer were marooned on a desert island, he would build two churches, so that there was a church that he could say he did not attend! (Colin Morris)

I just returned from a conference on Mennonite worship. The conference was held in Winnipeg and attracted many people from the Prairies. At lunch one day I talked to a person from a Saskatchewan congregation who complained about the diversity in his 50-member congregation, all of them Mennonite, all of them of a particular stream of Mennonites, all of them rural, with strikingly similar personal histories!

It's not the first time I've heard this complaint from congregations in Saskatchewan. Some years ago, in another congregation, the pastor complained in his sermon about

the diversity in the congregation -- a congregation of similar composition to the first, only his congregants were also in the same age spread, between seventy-five and a hundred! Exasperated by the diversity, he told the congregation, "We've got to learn to keep a lid on it!" Now, Saskatchewan people are by and large an agreeable and flexible lot, but those bent upon dissension are able find grounds for it anywhere!

Church history is littered with the casualties of dissension, many of them tragic. I am told that after the Thirty Years War (1618-48) a church in Augsburg was awarded neither to the Protestants nor to the Catholics. Instead, a wall was built in the sanctuary to divide the church from itself. Another church, in West Germany near the French border (Stiftskirche at Neustadt an der Weinstrasse) is also "shared," if you will, by Protestants and Catholics, and also divided into two by a wall so that the Catholics have the choir, and the Protestants the nave. Apparently the Catholics rarely use their section anymore and there were plans to reunite the building, but the problem is that the wall not only houses the Catholic organ, it is itself a historic monument, and so local heritage enthusiasts are determined to preserve the church with wall intact! (John Filsak)

Fasters, Net-casters, and Net-menders

Not only is divisiveness in our tradition apparent as early as the New Testament, I was somewhat disturbed to find it in other early Christian documents. Some of you may be familiar with the --Didache. It's an ancient Christian manual of instruction which was probably written in Syria during the first century. Lost for centuries, it was discovered in 1873 and is considered a valuable source of information about early Christian life and belief. It's really a handbook for Christian converts, a compendium of moral precepts, the method of instruction quite simple -- it proposes the right way to do something and the wrong way. In the midst of much fine instruction, however, one finds this instruction: "We do not insist on fasting on Mondays and Thursdays like those other hypocrites -- we fast on Tuesdays and Fridays." (Didache 8:1)

Now, it struck me that the first disciples were rather slow in developing this quarrelsome tradition, because it occurs to me that the raw materials for divisiveness were there right at the beginning. In our Gospel reading Matthew tells us that as Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon and Andrew, casting a net into the sea. (4:18) Soon after he met two other brothers, James and John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets. (4:21) Had these boys been a little sharper and more disagreeable, they could have made this sufficient cause for contentiousness. After all, net-casters had reason to feel smug; they actually caught fish. But, the net-menders could have said, "Without repair to your nets, there would be no casting!" Whereupon the casters could say, "Aah, but, didn't you hear Jesus? He invited us to be fishers, not menders!"

This bickering might be fanciful on my part, were it not so real. Christians often get caught in the net of dissension, entangled in the net of personality conflicts, or the net of theological partisanship. Many struggles, for example, have been fought over which is the more important task of the church: evangelism or nurture, mission or maintenance. When someone asked a church committee if they thought the church should be trying to gain members, one-third said, "Yes." One-third said, "No." And one-third said, "Yes, but...", the "but" implying we need to be careful who we let in.

The Church has also learned to quarrel over the array of "hot-button" issues that divide our society. It may be issues of law and order, expressions of human sexuality, the

balance between rights and responsibilities, or any of today's other charged and divisive issues, but when pitched as a battle between an "Us" who are right and a "Them" who are wrong, nothing very beneficial results.

It's one thing for a group of individuals to develop various biases and preferences, it's quite another to sink into polarized dysfunction. Polarization is a danger in all human relationships, on scales both large and small. Couples, for example, can polarize in various ways -- as one spouse becomes more and more the spendthrift, the other becomes more and more the miser; as one spouse gives increasing voice to feelings, the other may become increasingly rational and controlled; as one becomes more and more of a slob, the other becomes an increasingly compulsive straightener.

Any group can polarize, even Monday fasters and Tuesday fasters, even net-casters and net-menders! Each end of the polarized spectrum may represent a value that is legitimate -- and polarization is one way that a social system preserves balance -- but it is an unstable and conflictual balance. It represents a failure to integrate these values. ("The Dance of Polarization, and The Next Step Beyond" by Andrew Bard Schmoekler)

The Limits of Loyalty

We may, on the one hand, value the free flowering of the human spirit, but we also value a coherent social order. We may value loyalty, but when loyalties conflict, and become polarized, something more than a mechanical compromise -- a splitting of the difference, or a balancing of loyalties -- is needed.

Loyalty is one of ingredients that bind social networks together! Indeed, we may lament the loss of loyalty in modern culture, be it loyalty to our family, our local community, or our country. Some blossom under this ethos, for under it you are free to conduct your economic life, for example, by entering into short-term contracts, grabbing the best deal, and jumping to better situations at your earliest opportunity without any regard for your workforce. You can move your assets off shore, and yourself too, if that is necessary to avoid taxation and regulation by the country that initially nurtured you. (Bryan Schwartz, "Loyalty: The lost virtue," Ottawa Citizen, June 30, 1998) Surely, however, an individual existence without long-term attachments is an insecure and pointless existence. We all have a need to belong. As we grow up we learn where and to whom we belong. A deep sense of belonging helps us feel secure.

Any social group, church or otherwise, needs sufficient cohesiveness to have a discernible and helpful identity, and to facilitate a social system that is at least a notch above anarchy. An American minister in the Disciples of Christ denomination was complaining about license plates in certain American states that still draw attention to the Civil War. Lamenting that this war resulted in splitting some major Christian denominations, his only consolation was that his own denomination was still young when the Civil War occurred. "By 1860," he said, "we were probably not organized enough to divide." Their level of organization and belonging were too weak.

The Corinthians, however, seemed to suffer from an excessive sense of belonging. It was one thing for the Corinthian Christians to prefer when Apollos read Scripture, or when Paul preached, or when Cephas played the piano, but it appears that their various loyalties had polarized to the extent that they had become partisan combatants. Loyalty has its limits. A church needs sufficient cohesiveness to have a discernible and helpful identity, but not to the point of exclusion. We're all too familiar with the problems of

excessive loyalties. Human history is littered with its casualties. Bosnia. Israel. Ireland. To name just a few.

A Higher, More Inclusive Loyalty

The New Testament calls us to a higher, more inclusive loyalty. The Christian tradition has often floundered on the rocks of dissension, but it is also a tradition that has many beautiful and compelling expressions of human harmony. For ours is a tradition that proclaims that "...there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him." (Romans 10:12)

Ours is a tradition that proclaims that "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all...are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) Ours is a tradition that dares to believe that we can be transformed, our old self stripped of its contentiousness and "party spirit, our being clothed with a "new self" daily renewed in the image of its Creator. (Colossians 3:9-10) "In that renewal," says the New Testament, there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" (Colossians 3:11) The New Testament proclaims that Christ "is our peace; ...he has...broken down...dividing wall(s) of...hostility between us." (Ephesians 2:14) His intention, says the New Testament, is to "create in himself one new humanity...." (Ephesians 2:15)

Paul's letter to the Corinthians itself contains one of the most beautiful, compelling, poetic descriptions of harmonious love -- 1 Corinthians 13 -- "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal," and so on. "Love is patient; love is kind," and so forth. "...faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." (1 Corinthians 13:1, 4, & 13)

And then, of course, there is Paul's image of the human body, an intricate network of inter-related parts and systems if there ever was one. Such a simple image, but one so profound in its implications for the Church. Just as the fingers-need-the-arm-need-the-heart-need-the-blood, so Paul-needs-Apollos-needs-Cephas, and those who prefer one or the other need each other.

In Essentials Unity, In All Else Charity

Perhaps these biblical visions of harmony have often gone awry because of their very compelling nature. Religious visions and convictions appeal to deep loyalties. Something worth striving for is worth striving for vigorously, but not so vigorously that one defeats one's purpose, or rather, God's purpose -- His Divine intention for all of humanity to live in harmony and peace.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist tradition, is often quoted as saying: "In essentials, unity, in all else charity." The complexities of human harmony cannot be solved by a slogan, however well contrived, but Wesley's advice is sound. Too many conflicts, church conflicts included, are the result of considering too many things essential.

I suggested earlier, tongue in cheek, that Jesus' first disciples were rather slow in developing and nurturing conflict. They missed a splendid opportunity to draw a --line in the sand between net-casters and net-menders. Perhaps they were too focussed upon

Jesus to be able to devote sufficient time to dissension and strife, which is to suggest that that is where our higher loyalty lies.

It's not accidental that our epistle reading ends on the Cross, Paul saying, "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Corinthians 1:17-18)

Paul's Corinthian passage on dissension ends on an unadorned Cross! A Cross devoid of rhetoric, cleverness, sophistry, or any other ecclesiastical bric-a-brac we like to add to it. At the cross of Christ we are neither Jew nor Greek, Catholic nor Protestant, Mennonite nor evangelical. We all come as sinners in need of mercy and forgiveness. At the Cross there are no distinctions. Thanks be to God!

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.