

THE FIRST UNTIED CHURCH OF CHRIST IN CORINTH

Sermon, January 26, 2020

Annual Meeting Sunday

Text: I Corinthians 1:10-18

I'm sure by now you have noticed the sermon title, and you may have thought there was a (rare) typo in our bulletin. Well, we never have typos in OUR bulletins (*well, almost never*); the spelling here is intentional. You may be excused for thinking it was an unintentional mistake; after all, it is a fairly common error ... a quick search on Google will bring up the Rocky Mountain Conference for the **Untied** Church of Christ (not to be confused with the Churches of Christ in the **Untied** States; that's another organization) the Wakefield **Untied** Methodist Church in Wakefield, Virginia, the Lynwood Park **Untied** Church of God in Sandy Springs, GA, the **Untied** Presbyterian Church of Lebanon, KY, and one I found a few years ago -- The First **Untied** Methodist Church of Port St. Joe, FL who, by the way, advertised seeking full time youth pastor who is self motivated and "engergetic" ... and hopefully they're also looking for a secretary who can spell. And then there's **The Untied Dyslexic Church of Dog**, location unknown.

United and Untied ... both words use the exact same letters, but it matters where one places the "i" in relation to the "t" ... as the meaning and significance of the word completely changes. When the "i" is not in the right place, "united" becomes "untied." That's true in spelling, and that's true in theology. If you want unity, integrity, stability in your life and in your community, place *your* "i," before the "T." Place your "I" your self, your ego ... before the "T," before the cross. Placing ourselves in submission before the cross will create unity ... unity in our relationship with God and with God's people. When the "I" is in its proper place, there is unity; when the I is misplaced, well, things can become quickly untied, disjointed, chaotic ... both personally and interpersonally.

This, apparantly, is what was happening in Corinth; things in that first century church to whom Paul was writing were coming *untied*. It was the classic First Untied Church of Christ in Corinth.

A little background: Corinth was a bustling seaport city and international trade center; it was destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC and rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 46 BC. After 27 BC it became the Roman capital of the Greek region, geographically located halfway between Athens and Sparta. The acropolis of the city contained the temple of Aphrodite, where approximately one thousand female slaves were dedicated to the service of the goddess of love; temple prostitution was a common form of "worship" here at this temple, which is probably just a stone's throw from the Corinthian Christian church. The congregation of the church of Corinth was a rough and tumble mix of mostly recent converts, people from a Type A culture of merchants, mercenaries, international businesspeople and people from a wide variety of moral (*or, amoral*) and spiritual backgrounds; there were many intense, forceful and powerful egos.

Apparently "unity" was a problem in this congregation; there was continual infighting, quarreling and bickering as many apparently had difficulty putting their "I's" in the right place. *"My interpretation, my spiritual needs, my desires, my satisfaction ... I, I, I, Me, me, me. It has to be the way I want it to be, it has to be my way or no way. I, I, I."* To which the apostle Paul probably responded, *"Ei, yi, yi! Your 'I' is misplaced!"*

In verse 2 (*which we read last week*), Paul wrote: *"To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ -- their Lord and ours."* Now, this Corinthian congregation was quite the crowd to refer to as "sanctified." We read later in the letter they're getting drunk at holy communion (*their cups were a little larger than the ones we use*), and they're shouting and bellowing insults at each other in the process. Some are gorging themselves on food at the Lord's Supper while others went hungry (*their bread shares were a little larger than ours*), and one of these characters, more than likely one of their church leaders, is intimately involved with his father's wife; he's having an open affair with his stepmother! Again, this is a pretty hard crowd ... a crowd, though, that is in the *process* of being softened, sanctified, made whole.

If problems can be solved here, they can be solved anywhere. Corinth, this large Roman colony in Greece, a critical place where international traffic went north and south, east and west; had a large mixed population of Romans, Greeks, and Jews. It was noted for its wealth and luxury, but it was also noted for

the amoral and even vicious habits of the people; it was the original "sin city." It is no surprise there's lots of tension and contention in this church. They're not united; they're untied, divided, split. They're grumbling at and about each other, and in the first ten verses of his letter to this church in Corinth Paul refers no fewer than *six times* to "...*OUR Lord Jesus Christ.*" It's as if to say, "*C'mon folks, let's not focus on our differences, our former traditions, our backgrounds, our preferences; let's focus on, let's talk about, OUR Lord Jesus Christ.*" We read in verse 10 -- "*I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united (not untied) in mind and thought. Some from Chloe's household have informed me there are quarrels among you, what I mean is this: One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.'*"

It's likely one source of the apparent infighting arose from ethnic divisions. One group, the cosmopolitan Roman crowd, apparently favors Paul ... after all, Paul is a Roman citizen; he is a sophisticated, knowledgeable, informed, well-traveled man of the world. Another group, probably the native Greeks of Corinth, apparently prefers Apollos. Apollos is a native Greek; he's skilled in rhetoric and philosophical reasoning, which are finely tuned arts in the Greek culture. So he was more than likely an engaging orator, a spellbinding preacher, and he's a native resident who speaks the Greek language and knows the Greek culture and customs. Another faction, most likely the immigrant Jewish merchants along with their households, prefers Cephas, which is the Hebrew name for the apostle Peter. Perhaps they're thinking, "*Well, those gabby Greeks and those cosmo Romans are Gentiles; they're not like us. We're really more comfortable with those who know our customs and traditions, someone who is one of us, like Cephas.*" Then yet another group asserts, "*Well, WE follow Jesus.*" Now, everyone in that church is trying to follow Jesus or they wouldn't be there, but perhaps this faction are the purists, the pietists, the ones who seemed to be somewhat self-righteously saying, "*We know we follow Christ, but we are not all that sure about the rest of you!*" Paul refers to them a bit disdainfully later in his second letter as the "super apostles" (*see II Corinthians 12:11*); these are the ones who weren't too sure whether anyone else in the church, or in the church leadership for that matter, was genuinely Christian, but they know **THEY** are, because **THEY** are of Christ.

There was probably nobody better suited to draw this diverse group together than the person of Paul ... Paul, a well traveled man of the world, the Roman citizen, who appeals to the cosmopolitan crowd; Paul, a master of rhetoric and oratory, philosophical and legal reasoning which appeals to the Greek crowd; Paul, a man whose spirituality, devotion and passion are never in question, which appeals to the "super-spiritual" crowd; and Paul, the "Pharisee of Pharisees," the highly disciplined and trained Rabbi, a Jewish man steeped in Old Testament knowledge, culture, customs, tradition and discipline who appeals to the Jewish crowd. Paul was part and parcel of what every faction wanted, but note that Paul did NOT write, "*Don't follow those other leaders. Follow me, I got it all together!*" No, that's not what he wrote ... and as just an aside, anytime you hear any supposed spiritual leader promoting him/her self by denigrating other leaders, you'd do best to ignore him/her. No, Paul was quick to divert attention *from* himself; he had no desire to unite them around Paul. Nor did he disparage the other leaders. He knew where to put his "I" to keep the *united* from becoming *untied*.

Paul embodies the cosmopolitan sophistication and the eloquent philosophical rhetoric and the Jewish customs and the pietist's piety, but he puts all that aside, choosing only to proclaim the cross of Christ in all things and Jesus' lordship over all of life. He exhorts everyone to put their "I" before the "T," to put their selves in submission before the cross and, more precisely, before the One Who was hung upon that cross. Paul underscores that his identity was not in his qualifications or how many he had baptized nor how many in Corinth thought him a super apostle or eloquent preacher. Paul has placed the "I" of his life before the cross. After all, no leader, no cause, no issue, no theological position was crucified for us. Jesus was.

As we live our lives as individuals and as a church, and as we prepare to conduct our annual business as a church for the seventy-sixth time in a few moments, it is good to be reminded we are not united because we always agree (*although we often do*), we are not united because we always like each another (*although we often do*), but we are united when we individually and collectively put our I's, our egos, our selves, before the Cross, and determine that all we do as individuals and as a church will be done to please and honor and serve the One who endured that cross for us.