January 26, 2014 Norwalk

**Pastoral Prayer**

Wind-blown and frost-bitten, weary of the huddling and the bundling and the shuffling to stay upright, and bracing for still more, we gather, O God, nonetheless grateful to be alive and in your keeping and each other’s. We are grateful for warm clothes, warm houses, warm sanctuaries, and in the gratitude mindful of those who enjoy none of these blessings; mindful of those whose chill is unbroken -- whose propane tank is empty without the resources to mount the spike in prices; who have no coats to zip nor gloves to pull on -- and we offer for them a special prayer. We pray, as well, for those whose chill is deeper still -- emanating from a broken heart or a broken hope or broken health. We pray especially for:

Bless them, we pray, with the warmth of your Spirit and the embrace of your community.

We pray for our leaders -- those in our governments and those in our church; we pray for those who risk their lives on our behalf -- soldiers and firefighters, police and snowplow drivers. We pray for our Search Committee and their attention to your leading.

And we pray for ourselves -- as individuals and a church. May we, too, be discerning of the ways that you are leading, that we might be agents of your healing, your image in our homes and workplaces and public life, and instruments of your peace, for we pray in Christ’s name, and as he taught us saying: Our father, who art in heaven...

**Scripture Reading**

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

*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. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. 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.” Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*

*I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)*

*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.*

*“Hauntings of Old Preachers”*

My first serious choral experience was as a tenor in the Concert Choir of Cooper High School in Abilene, TX. Mrs. Sumerlin, our lovingly fiery director expected high results from us 60 or so juniors and seniors, and to the credit of her abilities, usually got them. But one day she scared us to death. Instead of the usual sectional arrangement that we had stood in thus far - all the sopranos over here, the altos over here, the tenors bundled there and the basses gathered there - that day she reorganized us into quartets - into what she revealingly called "staggered formation." All the voices were distributed evenly, so that standing on one side of me was a soprano, behind me a bass, and on the other side of me an alto, and that pattern replicated all across the choir. I'll never forget the nakedness I felt as suddenly my own was the only tenor voice I readily heard. No longer could I sing with a gang mentality, and occasionally hide in those bars I didn't quite know behind the neighboring voices that did. All of a sudden I was exposed!

At first, the tendency was for everyone to sing in a whisper, uncomfortable with the solo sensation. But responding to Mrs. Sumerlin's demands, we quickly came to do the opposite: concentrating on our particular line of music, over-singing in order to hear what was coming out of our mouths.

Finally, to underscore the purpose of the change, Mrs. Sumerlin patiently said: "If you can't hear the voices beside you, you're singing to loud." Choral music, after all, is not the simultaneous passage of four solo lines, but the blending of voices to create the work of art that is, when done correctly, music.

Which is something like the church. Paul compared it with the human body - many individual components, but joined together in a single living organism. The church, though many, is one. As the third verse affirms in that familiar hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers": "We are not divided, all one body we, one in hope and doctrine, one in charity."

At least that's the way it was intended. But from its very beginnings, the church has had its problems. It has known an almost insatiable appetite for distraction and triviality, miring itself in bog after bog of pettiness, competition, and misunderstanding. Even in its embryonic state - in the interactions of Jesus' closest followers and friends, there was argument about who among them eternity would rank as the greatest.

And, of course, contentions of varying pedigrees have ever since seduced the church off its course. In the passage we read together, for example, we look over Paul's shoulder to see a church that had gotten muddied up with cliques. They weren't so much fighting over what to believe or how to live out those beliefs. They were haggling over heroes. You know: "My preacher's better than your preacher." There were those who still carried the torch for Paul who had founded the congregation - even though he was now living across the Aegean Sea carrying on his missionary work. Others touted Apollos, the more recent minister there, who, some felt, was more intellectual than Paul and reputedly a better preacher. Others reached all the way back to the original apostles like Peter, and some claimed the name of Jesus' - not as the needle and thread of reconciliation, but as a chisel to drive a deeper wedge.

It was, in short, a loss of center and focus. And it is a ditch to which our wheels could be vulnerable during these days of continuing transition. Even if it was against your better instincts, you have started getting used to me standing up here on Sunday mornings -- the way I slouch a little in the pulpit and shift my weight from foot to foot and have either found those little quirks endearing or unnerving. You've heard enough of my Texas drawl to decide if it's irrelevant or absolutely distracting. And you've come to grips enough with my style and personality, choice of words and volume level to realize that I am different from the minister who preceded me - and all those who preceded her. And it wouldn’t surprise me -- or, frankly, hurt my feelings -- if you have found yourself wishing your way backwards in favor of one or another of those previous ministers who was, in your opinion, “way better than this fill in.” On the other hand, others of you have even been kind enough to indicate that it isn’t so bad after all and that it would be fine with you if I stayed awhile. Meanwhile, I and the Search Committee are looking forward to whoever may come next. It could also be that you are in that beloved group who love whomever the church happens to call. Comparisons are only natural and I'm not a very jealous sort.

The danger, however, as Paul recognized it is when those valuations, those comparisons and others like them, get in the way of our ability to be in ministry together. Like me or any of those previous ministers or not, Paul would say about himself or about any of his successors, we have a mission to carry out. And so Paul appeals "for unity - for the congregation to be one in its mind, or outlook, its purpose, and its life." (PNCL) If you can't hear the voice beside you, you are singing too loud.

So what about that "purpose"? At a time when the world is growing increasingly secular, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) - a movement about which it could once be said was the fastest growing religious movement in America - has, along with all mainline denominations, been growing smaller and older in recent years. There are lots of reasons for that, but one is clearly our interest level in the core practices and priorities of our faith. When I first moved to my last church I was prowling around in the building’s interesting places -- you know, the behind the scenes nooks and crannies -- and I found what looked to be the baptistry dressing rooms. I say “looked to be” because it was hard to tell for sure. They were located where I would expect to find such rooms, but there wasn’t a baptismal robe in sight, and the rooms were filled with storage. It would almost have been a nuisance if someone wanted to get baptized! The church had sort of gotten into the mindset that those spaces wouldn’t be needed. But think about what that says -- that we won’t likely be baptizing anyone anytime soon. I haven’t looked around here, but it wouldn’t surprise me if there were boxes stored in our baptistry dressing rooms, too.

Most churches these days enjoy a wealth of bare lumber often called “pews.” Now, I don’t want a tail to start wagging its dog -- we don’t baptize people in order to fill up pews -- but the only reason we have seating is to accommodate those who have been baptized and those we are encouraging in that direction. If, on the other hand, we have lost interest in that priority then we ought to look into Goodwill’s interest in used pews.

I have often said that “no church has a right to exist -- a REASON to exist, but not a RIGHT.” And at least part of that reason is, if I remember Jesus correctly, making disciples. Let’s be clear: that’s not the same thing as filling up pews. It’s relatively easy to fill up pews if we want to “leap from the pinnacle of the temple” every Sunday -- swallow goldfish and advertise appearances by “Beauty Queens for Jesus.” We could promote our flavored latte’s, turn liturgical somersaults, swing from the candelabra, and start putting catchy, provocative sayings on the sign out front. And we would very likely draw a crowd. But that bears precious little resemblance to making disciples -- living as a sign, foretaste and instrument of God’s coming reign.

Besides, in the meantime we would be ignoring the considerable needs that surround us. Consider the notion that every one of these empty seats represents the name of someone in the Norwalk vicinity who needs this church - its community; its compassion; its joy; its challenge; its friendship; its support and its will to minister in the world. Empty seats just waiting for people who need your invitation.

Here in these in-between times it is easy for our past and our future to find themselves in competition -- the collision between “I sure miss who we use to be and what we used to do and who used to preach here” and “I can’t wait for the next chapter to begin.” And while those opposite tuggings are natural, they serve little good. Yes, this was a great church back then. Yes, there are great things ahead for us. But the primary question right now is “are we the church TODAY?”

Hopefully, we can find someplace -- other than the baptistry -- to lock away the hauntings of old preachers and our nostalgia for them. Hopefully somewhere in one of those boxes stored in the baptistry is our copy of the great commission - the charge to go into all the world to be peacemakers, yes; to be salt of the earth and lights for the world; to recognize the face of Christ in those we feed and house at camp; but also to go into all the world to teach what we have heard, and baptize children of God into the fellowship of Christ. Hopefully, somewhere in one of those boxes is our will, our initiative, and our common desire to get on with business of being the Church.

Paul, I think, would invite us to turn in our hymnals and sing with gusto while he wildly waved a conducting baton: "Rise up O Church of God, have done with lesser things. Give heart and mind and soul and voice to serve the King of Kings."