

**January 22, 2017**  
**1 Corinthians 1:10-17**

Today is the tenth anniversary of my ordination. It has been a rich decade. Baptisms, weddings, funerals, reading, writing, coaching, meetings, reading, writing, visits, meetings, reading, and writing. (pause) Although many think that pastors' time is spent in peaceful contemplation, my experience is that ministry is made of mundane, awkward, and even uncomfortable moments. Whether helping committee members arrive at consensus, or sitting with tense family members around a dying relative, there are no road maps to simple solutions. Ministry is messy. Because people are messy. Each of us. All of us. The church is full of ordinary people with ordinary, messy lives. We bring the mess right into the center of the church. Our family arguments hover overhead while we worship together. Our worries run down our main hall. Our mental illness is present in committee meetings. Our individual preferences cloud our love of community.

Church is the place where messy people meet. We come here because we have needs, not because we are perfect. And our imperfections lead to disagreements and different camps. We approach things from different perspectives and experiences. We dream different dreams and hope different hopes. And instead of blending together in a wonderful stew, we tend to separate our flavors into separate piles. Like-minded people cluster together, and others move to different corners. Those who adore Mary move into the Roman Catholic church. Those who want to work for their salvation move into the Methodist corner. Those who don't have to do anything, but rely purely on God's grace move into our Presbyterian corner.

The Church is a sadly fragmented institution. Even in the first century, immediately after Christ's death, the disciples and apostles fostered division amongst themselves. As Paul wrote here, believers aligned themselves with Apollos or Cephas or himself. People in the Corinthian church staked their identity not in Christ, but with individual leaders. They fell victim to following a personality instead of committing to the community. They lost sight on the larger goal of Jesus Christ, and stopped short with whatever church leader they loved. Some of the Corinthians preferred an educated, philosophical approach. Others were passionate about evangelism amongst Jewish people. And others were drawn to the message of freedom Christ preached. They divided themselves into theological cliques.

(We will see the specific arguments at play as we continue in 1 Corinthians over the next few weeks. Sexuality, marriage, diet, litigious practices, and communion are among the issues on the table... things the church still discusses today...)

At any rate, Paul heard about the dissension amongst the community and sent a letter to the young church. Paul knew that unity amongst believers was both difficult to achieve AND worth pursuing. So he pushed them to work for it. "Be in agreement and without divisions... be united in the same mind and in the same purpose." It wasn't enough to be generally be Christian. It wasn't enough to be loosely connected to their congregation. It wasn't enough to agree on *theory*. Paul called them to be united in the same mind and purpose. Be united in thought and deed. Stand together behind the one leader, Jesus Christ.

If this was written to Sweet Hollow, Paul would have said, "Pastor Joan told me that you all were fighting amongst yourselves. Some said that they are with Pastor

Wallace, and others say that they are with Pastor Segers, and others say that they are with Pastor Flannagan. What are you thinking?! Was Christ divided?! I'm glad that I'm not part of your shenanigans. Stop acting the fool. You are part of the one body of Christ, with Christ as your primary leader. Be united in your thoughts and in your deeds, in your minds and in your mission statement.”

Two critical pieces about ministry are embedded in Paul's words here. **First:** the church (or a congregation) is not defined by the pastor. Let me say this again. No congregation is a pastor's congregation. Sweet Hollow was never Pastor Rebecca's church or Pastor John's church, nor is it my congregation. No person here has ultimate authority, or the roadmap to the future, or the right answers for the tests we face. Just as we say at the Table when we receive Communion, Sweet Hollow is the church of Jesus Christ. And our Savior invites those who trust in him to share in this community. We are followers of Jesus Christ who makes the rules, sets the course, and defines our identity.

**Second:** membership in a congregation, and membership in the body of Christ is not decided by individual preferences. We are not invited to choose what makes us happy. We are called to follow Christ. Together. Shoulder to shoulder with those who disagree with us. Step by step down a road that we may not choose.

For Presbyterians, this message is particularly challenging because we have historically permitted differences of opinions amongst all our members. From the average congregation member to those in the highest offices, all have equal voice in our church. Every church member has voice and vote in our congregational meetings (which will be next Sunday). We do this because we believe that God can speak to *any* person – young or old, male or female, regardless of education or finances or power or other

qualifications. We do this because we want to be sure that we hear God's voice and follow Christ even if it is made known even in an unlikely or unwanted character. We believe that God may change the hearts and minds of the majority through one small voice. It may take years. It may be messy and uncomfortable, but we leave the door open for that voice to be heard and our preferences to be overruled.

For myself, a pastor and church leader, the call is to shepherd people into the larger body of Christ, never away or apart from, never on my own rabbit trails. Ministry is a call to work within the unity of the body, never giving up or walking away because of disagreements. Ministry within the church is not about what I want or what makes me comfortable, but what Christ wants for the larger body. Ministry is a call to cultivate and steward God's church, not my own. Really, the call for church leaders is to get out of the way so that it's clear that Jesus is the boss.

For our congregation, this text has implications for how we define ourselves and our vision. We are called to differentiate ourselves from various pastors and leaders. This is a call to align ourselves solely with Christ. This is a call to let go of individual preferences, and **together** follow Christ's roadmap for mission and ministry.

Sweet Hollow's Visioning Task Force has worked hard for the past year, asking questions, listening, praying, and discerning what's next. They are trying to take what each of us have said individually, and draw a collective vision for the future. The road will not be easy. There are any number of challenges, and a myriad of opinions about what *should be* our priority and how we might achieve it. We will fail if unless we can commit to the same path together. We will fail if anything other than Jesus is our goal – whether that is larger membership or a bigger children's program or other enticing things.

For us to move forward, we need to be unified in our mind and mission. We need to stand beside one another and behind Jesus.

As I begin my second decade of ministry, and as you draw nearer to 200 years of ministry, may we all seek to follow Jesus first. Each moment and each day.