

ANIMAL HOUSE

An Epiphany/Conf. 2 Sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:10-18—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
January 22, 2017—First United Church of Christ (Cong'l), Milford, CT

[the Confirmation 2 class oversees an election of what pet is the congregation's favorite: dogs, cats, or miscellaneous pets.]

While the votes are turned in, we can reflect for a minute on today's reading. Those of us active in larger churches like this sometimes think that our tensions and differences would go away if we just found a smaller church where everybody agrees on everything, but let me tell you, that church doesn't exist. Paul helped found a church in Corinth that only had about 30 or 40 people in it, and guess what? They quickly formed factions. Go Apollos! Go Paul! Go Cephas! Each group probably had 5-15 people in it but their disagreements got so significant that the factions are the first thing Paul feels he needs to address in his letter back to the church in Corinth. He's like, "Dear church of Corinth: Grace and peace to you from God and the Lord Jesus Christ. I pray for you always. What do I pray for you? To avoid divisions and let there be unity of mind and thought. You see, Chloe let me know that you're quarreling.

I can just see the Corinth church members saying: "Chloe, that tattletale! Snitches get stitches!"

Corinth is a prime biblical example that it doesn't take much for people to oppose each other and to raise the stakes, to escalate the situation. But escalating antagonism didn't start with the early Christians and didn't end then, either. For instance, we're in the middle of World War I's centennial. You may recall that conflict started when Archduke Ferdinand and his wife of the Hapsburg dynasty were assassinated in June 1914 by a Serb, surely a dark day but not itself a reason for world war. It was what happened next that caused the war as much as the assassinations: the Serbs asked for Russia to have their backs; the Austria-Hungarians asked for Germany to have their back; then it

escalates even more when the UK and France get dragged in and pretty soon everybody takes sides.

I'm not saying that alliances are bad, just they're only as good as the ability of the people to take a step back and see how our human character can lead us down aggressive, destructive roads.

Today we see people take sides in less violent ways when we watch conference championship football games or high school teams compete against each other, and in bloody situations when urban gangs declare war against each other opening fire on city streets.

If it's not Paul vs. Apollos, it's Axis vs. Allies, it's dogs vs. cats, it's defense vs. social spending, it's blue vs. red, ways we divide ourselves to know who's for us and who's against us.

The bad news is that when we take sides we can also forget our common humanity, the common spark of love and unity, which is a gift of God. The bad news is that whether we are at church, at work, in in complicated family situations, or elsewhere, we often take a side, dig in our heels, listen to our allies, discount or dismiss the voices of adversaries, and lose sight of what binds us as God's people.

But there's hope. For Paul, he finds hope in the message of the cross of all things. On the cross God through Jesus Christ is not on the winning side. On the cross, Jesus loses his life, Jesus appears to lose to the forces that conspire to kill him. The forces that live comfortably in palaces and don't have the ability to stomach dissension even when it comes in peace and turns the other cheek.

If you remember, Jesus makes waves, but by preaching to pray for and love your enemy, to bless those who curse you, to offer your shirt to the one who takes your cloak. Jesus is the one who tells the story of the Samaritan who saves the life of a Jew

despite being social enemies; Jesus reaches out to non-Jews in healing love; Jesus tells his followers that the one God of all is loved when we love our neighbor, and our neighbor is anyone! Jesus was fearless in a world that ran on fear, and the flames of fear are fanned by division. Perfect love extinguishes all fear, so before that could happen, fear decides to extinguish perfect love first. On that cross. But fearless in life, Jesus is true to his message and true to his fearlessness on that cross, too. Jesus looks like the ultimate fool to the Romans and the Jerusalem establishment because he doesn't play by the rules of division and fear, he doesn't try to outlast them or undo them. He forgives and dare I say loves the ones who hate him. In living for God and love he will not hate the other, no matter how hard they try to be hated by him.

And so it is that Paul points to the logic of the cross not just because the cross leads to Easter and in Easter faith we all inherit eternal life but also because already on the cross Jesus dismisses division as a result of fear. With faith in God, as God's Son, Jesus does not live in that fear.

Which leads us back to our own lives. What do we fear that divides us? Do we fear isolation? Do we fear not being heard? Not being loved? Not being cared for? Not getting what we deserve? Or maybe getting what we deserve? Do we fear death? Or some boogeyman in Russia or the Middle East or the Oval Office? Do we fear some non-descript other? Do we simply blame someone else for everything that doesn't go our way because it's easier that way?

The angels say to those who witness Jesus' birth, "Have no fear," both because the angels are scary but also because in Christ there is no fear." Jesus' own words repeat the sounding joy that love casts out fear and God transcends division.

In the fall of 1914, British and German soldiers dug trenches on the Great War's Western front in France and Belgium. They had expected their conflict to last a few months but came to realize

that machine guns made troop movements extremely dangerous. But on Christmas morning, something different happened. The soldiers dismissed their fears, and as British Second Lieutenant Dougan Chater wrote, "About ten o'clock this morning I was peeping over the parapet when I saw a German, waving his arms, and presently two of them get out of their trenches and some came towards ours. We were going to fire on them when we saw they had no rifles so one of the men went out to meet them and in about two minutes the ground between the two lines of trenches was swarming with men and officers of both sides, shaking hands and wishing each other a happy Christmas." On that day, not one shot was fired in that area and along most of the western front. One British Commander, Sir John French, "was not pleased. 'Such unwarlike activity must cease,'" he wrote.¹

Unfortunately, the unwarlike activity did cease, and millions of people died in World War I, which then set up the world to return to war 20 years later and kill tens of millions more. But what if unwarlike activity didn't cease, but instead caught on? What would it look like if warring factions in organizations or on battlefields defined themselves first as God's children or as human beings instead of as being against one another?

When I moved from southern Texas to northern Wisconsin in eleventh grade, I was quickly pegged as a nerdy kid and was asked to join Academic Decathlon. One of my jobs was to help the other academic decathletes practice their speeches. Now in academic decathlon, you have to have two students participate at each of three GPA levels, so the overachievers got mixed in with the slackers. I got to get to know folks from very different backgrounds in my new, rural, Midwestern hometown. One of them was Kelly, a sweet high school senior with an interest in art who surprised herself with how much she enjoyed speaking.

Last week my mother sent me some newspaper clippings from Wisconsin, and in it was news about Kelly. She now lives in California, and after working

in business for ten years, she decided to become a portrait artist.

Beatriz Sanchez Pacios writes: "While [Kelly] was using her loved ones as subjects, she wondered if the same thing would happen with unknown people. Testing the theory with herself and her students, she found that it did. Taking another leap forward, she had to explore whether art truly had peace-making potential.

Inspired to "transform the hopeless into hope," [Kelly] created a portrait workshop for a group of Israeli and Palestinian teenagers through a peace program called "Hands of Peace."

"This is a group of people who rarely have the opportunity to meet or get to know one another," she explained. "In fact, only a small percentage of Palestinians are ever able to meet an Israeli outside of a border checkpoint of the seemingly intractable wall that has separated these two groups for generations."

She had them portray each other. "Many of them were sitting knee to knee with a supposed enemy, who they may have never before encountered this closely," she said.

She noticed a Palestinian boy who was trying to draw an Israeli girl, but he was not doing the assignment. She wondered if her student might have been too influenced by messages of fear. [She

was afraid that the activity wasn't making the difference she had hoped it would.]

When she asked him why he wasn't drawing, he answered, "As I look at her, I realize how beautiful she is and I do not want to disappoint her with the drawing, that it does not do justice to her beauty."

When Kelly gave a Tedx talk last year in San Diego on her ministry, she reflected: "Generations of fear passed down to these two groups of people and this is the worst he can come up with?" Mellos concludes that even the worst of enemies, when they attend to each other, look one another in the eye, are faced with the same divine spark that lies within them. It takes a commitment to sit across from one another and to see Christ in the other, but the consequence can be beauty. Because God imbues each of us with a common spark that does not die in this life, and that leads us to new life after this.

Israeli or Palestinian; Cat lover or dog lover; republican, democrat and independent; Apollos follower, Cephas follower, Paul follower; all God's critters are equally beloved by God; all God's critters gotta place in the choir, some sing lower some higher some sing out loud on the telephone wire, and some just clap their hands, or paws or anything they got now.

Now, do we have the results of the pet election?
Dog wins...

ⁱ *The War to End All Wars*, Russell Freedman (Clarion: 2010), pp. 48-49.