

Psalm 36:5-10, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway

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Dream Church

This weekend our nation celebrates the life and ministry of a man who was famous for having a dream, and for living his life confident that that dream would one day become a reality. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of a church and a society free of segregation, where all people are treated with dignity, justice and respect. The scripture text we read this morning comes from the writings of another dynamic and outspoken dreamer – the apostle Paul. Like Martin Luther King who came after him, Paul also dreamed of a church where the love and care of God was reflected in the respect and love of the people of God. In fact, much of the dream for which Dr. King gave his life has its roots in the dream Paul proclaimed.

Many of us here today, depending upon our age, may have witnessed first hand the work of Dr. King. We can see concrete evidence of his work in our lives today, and we can see the places where his dream is yet to be, where it is now our turn to work to make that dream become reality.

We don't know as much about Corinth in the later half of the first century and it would be a stretch to say that Corinth was like the United States in the 1950's and 60's. What we do know about Corinth in the days of Paul's writings though, is that there was a lot that was not right.

Corinth was known as kind of the 'sin city' of its day. It had a reputation for wealth without culture and disregard and abuse of the poor.¹ The church in Corinth, to which Paul was writing, was really not one congregation but a collection of smaller congregations within the community. It is clear from Paul's letter that the church, much like the community around it, had gotten into a pattern of divisive, arrogant and segregated ways, spending more time arguing about and articulating their differences than focusing on what they shared in common. Unfortunately this sounds painfully familiar, both with regard to our nation, and the church at times.

¹ Interpreter's Bible, Volume 10, pg. 775.

This is what Paul is addressing here. If we were to keep reading in First Corinthians it is in the verses immediately following what we read this morning that Paul gives that image of the human body we know so well. The idea that the church of Jesus Christ is made up of many individual and important parts which come together to form one whole. The Corinthian church clearly had many gifted and talented individuals. They just seemed to have a difficult time seeing beyond their differences to the church of Jesus Christ Paul knew they were called to be.

Just as Martin Luther King did in the 60's, when Paul looked at the Corinthian church he saw what was, all that was wrong and so far off from the message Christ lived, but he also saw what *could be*. He did not give up on this wayward community. In these last few chapters of First Corinthians Paul articulates his dream for the church.

Paul dreams of a church in which every Christian would yearn for and work for a common unity in Christ. And not a unity that calls for bland sameness, but one that celebrates and values the unique gifts of each individual.

Paul dreams of a church that rejects all forms of religious or social segregation. Paul was fighting against class segregation within the church. Earlier in the letter he chastises the wealthy worshipers for eating all the food in the buffet line and drinking all the wine from the communion chalice and leaving the poor hungry. He is insistent that Christians see themselves as one body in Christ. Not the same, but united in Christ.

I don't know if reading this text on this particular week is one of those God coincidences, but tomorrow marks the beginning of the week of prayer for Christian unity. This is a global event, sponsored by the Vatican and the World Council of Churches, celebrated every year between January 18 and 25.² I believe it is lifted up more in the Catholic and Episcopal traditions than our own, but it is noted on our Presbyterian calendars. It is, as its title suggests, a week when Christians around the world are called to particularly pray and work for the unity of the church. The theme this year, 2023 "Do good. Seek justice" based on Isaiah 1:17.³ I thought that theme fits well for a Sunday when we hear Paul reminding us of the diversity and richness of our spiritual gifts.

² <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/xi-week-of-prayer-for-christian-unity/2016/worship-and-background-material-for-the-week-of-prayer-for-christian-unity-2016>

³ <https://www.atonementfriars.org/2023-week-of-prayer-theme-announced-do-good-seek-justice/>

Between Paul's writing, this being MLK weekend, our call to pray for Christian unity just now and the general dis-unity that seems so prevalent in our nation and our world these days, I have been thinking about this concept of Christian unity.

It can be so difficult for us. On the one hand we know that diversity is a good thing. Paul is right. We do need different perspectives and different talents. Green is a beautiful color but a rainbow would not be nearly as beautiful if it were all green. But on the other hand, holding together all that diversity quickly becomes a challenge. We may be all one in the spirit of God but sometimes it becomes very difficult for us to see that Spirit in a brother or sister, sibling who is so very different from ourselves. We see this struggle play out within our own denomination of the Presbyterian Church USA and we certainly see it among all the people that claim this faith of ours. Paul has a very demanding dream here.

Recently I spent some time reading a sermon Dr. King delivered at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta on July 4, 1965. This was about two years after his famous, "I Have a Dream" speech that he delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. In this sermon he still had the dream. In addition to reminding his listeners of his dream for a world free of segregation, where, as he says, "Truth will reign supreme and all of God's children will respect the dignity and worth of human personality." King also lifts up the importance of *having* a dream. He reminded his congregation that our forbearers had a dream and that dream has shaped our nation.

We as Christians also have a dream that can give us hope and shape the way we interact with one another. A dream that unites us despite our differences, and maybe more importantly because of our differences. Clearly it is not easy. We see evidence of that nearly every day. But Paul reminds us that that variety is precisely our gift. It is by God's Holy Spirit that we are gifted each one differently. "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone." And it is by the Holy Spirit that we are called to the unity of the body of Christ.

Now it is our turn, our time, to hold onto that dream, as Paul did, as Martin Luther King did, keeping the hope alive and living our lives toward that dream with our lives today.

May God keep us dreaming, and working to make the dreams God gives to us reality.