

## HOW NOT TO END UP IN A FAMILY FEUD

Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

One of our favorite TV shows, *Seventh Heaven*, features a minister and his wife sharing life with their seven children ranging in age from their early twenties to twin two-year old boys. *7th Heaven* chronicles many of the complex problems and conflicts families face today. The shows have touched on such topics as the Holocaust, hate crimes, violence in schools, drug use, vandalism, drinking and driving, teen pregnancy, homelessness, and intolerance. But the underlying theme of every show is the constant feuding of family members who really love one another. The show reminds me that our families often become battlegrounds of feuding egos.

Saint Paul compares the Christian church in Corinth to a feuding family. He addressed the Corinthian Christians as his brothers (and sisters), family members. He says, "I appeal to you that there be no *divisions* among you." He uses the Greek word σχίσματα, or *schism*. I appeal to you that there be no *schisms* among you. Schism is what happens when feuding Christians end up divorcing themselves from the church, their spiritual family. Schism is the ecclesiastical equivalent of divorce.

Last week we learned that the First Presbyterian Church of Corinth in ancient Greece was highly gifted. Every member had a gift. Some members had many gifts. But gifted people often have difficulty getting along with one another. We're, perhaps, most familiar with gifted athletes who bounce from one team to another because they're unable to get along with coach, owner or players. Sometimes gifted people in churches can't seem to get along with others. They bicker. They fight. They shout and sometimes, unfortunately, they quit and their gifts are lost to the church. Gifted people, like us (because we're all gifted by God) can become so enamored by the

wonderful gifts God has given us that we can't see or appreciate gifts God has given to others or we expect everybody to be as gifted as we are in certain areas. So after Paul expressed gratitude to the Corinthian Christians for how God had enriched them with every spiritual gift he appeals to them that "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."

Paul mentions four divisions rooted in four powerful personalities. The first group said, "I belong to Paul." Paul preached a gospel of Christian freedom from Jewish laws. His gentile followers were accused of turning freedom into license and overstepping the boundaries of morals and ethics. Paul's followers were the liberals of their day, always pushing the boundaries to include the excluded and upsetting the conservatives. The second group said, "I belong to Apollos." Apollos was an eloquent and learned speaker, an intellectual from Alexandria, Egypt. *But sometimes gifted intellectual Christians don't have much tolerance for* His followers were intellectuals, ~~who wanted little to do with~~ uneducated and superstitious Christians. A third group said, "I belong to Cephas." Cephas is the Hebrew word for Peter the Apostle. They were Jewish Christians and held tenaciously to traditionalist ethics and family values. *If they were saying "we all belong to Christ..."* A fourth group said, "I belong to Christ." Very likely, they were a little, intolerant, self-righteous group who claimed to be the only true Christians in Corinth. William Barclay said, "Their real fault was not in saying that they belonged to Christ, but in acting as if Christ belonged to them." Spiritual descendants of these divisions still inhabit our churches today. *we all belong to Christ ... should all be in one church ... we need liberals, conservatives, intellectuals, ... and no gospel ... and no gospel ...* But our job, Paul says, is to proclaim the gospel. Some of us are liberals. Some of us are conservatives. Some of us are intellectuals but that shouldn't create a schism – a divorce in the family of Christ. God wants to mold us (conservatives, liberals, traditionalists, intellectuals) into a family of Christians dedicated to proclaiming the unconditional love and leadership of Jesus Christ. But we keep getting hung up on more trivial matters. For example, for the last 20 years

our denomination has had a fixation on sex that has diverted us from our mission to proclaim the good news to all people. We've argued for over twenty years about who can and who cannot be ordained to church office. Divisions have grown up within the church. The church should address the issue of sexuality and listen to a diversity of voices as together we seek God's will in Scripture, but I fear that those outside who need to hear the Gospel every bit as much as we do – hear, instead, a family feud - bickering, condemnation and a message of intolerance. Paul writes, “Christ” sent me “to proclaim the gospel so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.” <sup>The power of the cross united -</sup> The power of the cross converts God's enemies into God's friends and family.<sup>^</sup> The focus of our message as Christians isn't *sex* but *God's love for sinners*.

Last week I watched the mother and father of John Walker Lynd come to the defense of their twenty-year old son captured in Afghanistan while fighting with the Taliban. The love of Frank Lynd and Marilyn Walker for their son is far greater than the differences that once led them to <sup>split &</sup> get a divorce. Marilyn Walker, who hadn't seen her son for two years, said, "My love for him is unconditional and absolute. I am grateful to God that he's been brought back to his family and his home." <sup>what did she mean ... How do we deal with family members that turn on us</sup> God in Christ comes to the defense of men, women and children who have gone over to the other side and says to us in the message of the cross, "My love for you is unconditional and absolute. Come back to your true family and home."

Presbyterian minister and writer, Fred Buechner, has said that when Jesus took the bread and said, "This is my body broken for you" (1 Corinthians 11:24), it's hard to believe that even in his wildest dreams he foresaw the tragic and ludicrous brokenness of the church as his body. There's *no reason* why everyone should be Christian in the same way and *every reason* to leave room for differences, but if all the competing factions of Christendom were to give as much of themselves to the high calling and holy hope that unites them as they do now to the relative



inconsequentialities that divide them, the church would look more like the kingdom of God for a change and less like an ungodly mess.”

Take a look at our church pictorial directory this afternoon and ask yourself, “Who's in charge of the Oxford Presbyterian Church? Am I in charge? Is the session in charge? Are the deacons in charge? Or the Building, Christian Ed, Evangelism, or Worship committee in charge? Who calls the shots at the Oxford Presbyterian Church? Is it some other powerful personality? No! The true head of the church is always Jesus Christ. <sup>Be following of Paul, Apollos, Peter</sup> ~~All~~ throughout history, since the time that Paul was writing his letters to the Corinthians, people have been looking at their earthly leaders — Paul, Apollos, Peter — and believing that they're in charge of the church. But -- whether we're a conservative fan of Peter, a liberal follower of Paul or an intellectual disciple of Apollos -- our common leader is Jesus, now and forever. Though some of us may believe we have Christ in our own theological corner – let's pray to God that we'll be found in his corner.

Let us pray: Eternal God, look with favor upon feuding families and churches. Give us wisdom and devotion in our common life, that each may be to the other a strength in need, a counselor in perplexity, a comfort in sorrow, and a companion in joy. Grant that our wills may be so knit together in your will, and our spirits in your Spirit, that we may grow in love and peace with you and each other all the days of our lives. Give us the grace, when we hurt each other, to recognize and confess our fault, and to seek each other's forgiveness and yours. Make our life together a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair. Give us such fulfillment of our mutual love that we may reach out in concern for others. Give to us, by your grace, spiritual daughters and sons, and the wisdom to bring them up to know, love and serve you. Grant that all who have heard your preached and written word may find their lives strengthened, and that all who are married may depart with their own promises renewed. Enrich with your grace all husbands and wives, parents and children, that, loving and supporting one another, we may serve those in need and be a sign of your kingdom. Grant that the bonds by which all your children are united to one another may be so transformed by your Spirit that your peace and justice may fill the earth, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.