



“DIVISION REVISION”
SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 9: 1-4; 1 CORINTHIANS 1: 10-18
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
January 26, 2020

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Isaiah 9:1-4

9:1 But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

9:2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.

9:3 You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.

9:4 For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

1:10 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.

1:11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

1:12 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."

1:13 Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

1:14 I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,

1:15 so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name.

1:16 (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)

1:17 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.

1:18 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.

The Word of the LORD.
Thanks be to God.

The scream came from a place too deep for words. And those who heard it with their own ears say they will never forget the sound. It was the language of their primal and wounded connection.

She was a wife crying out. She was a mother wailing for her children's grief. She was a South African giving voice to her country's anguish, the anguish of her people.

Nomonde Calata's husband, Fort, was brutally killed by security forces during South African apartheid. Fort was one of the Cradock Four—four men in the South African town of Cradock who worked to end apartheid who were killed for their activism. Fort was a well-loved school teacher and a faithful Christian. He was killed because he believed in liberation and equity.

Nomonde Calata's scream was the unforgettable sound of love seeking truth and acknowledgment of that truth. It was over 20 years ago—the 1990s, that The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa began with the Cradock Four case.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu called her scream “the defining sound of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.”

A country deeply divided groping in the depths of injustice and unending grief for the power of common humanity, for a way to heal. Nomonde explains that they were brought together by the powerful force of *Ubuntu*, a traditional belief in shared humanity that encompasses love, care, mutual regard, compassion, and being with each other.

Nomonde describes *Ubuntu* as one word that means lots of things, “It is a heart that you have that thinks for the next person.”¹

¹ <http://nomondecata.com>

Her indescribable scream came from that connection—that place of interdependence, that vulnerable place that knits us all together—that embodies the impact of our connection, that feels the pain of any violation of that deep relationship.

America is divided—wounded by a history in common with South Africa’s—in fact; South African officials came to America as they set Apartheid into motion to learn from our segregationist policies from states like Mississippi and Alabama. Jim Crow and the terror of lynching and the brutality of state sanctioned racism was their teacher.

What is the sound of our common humanity? What is the primal scream that brings us back to each other to listen to the truth of the harm, to be together in our shared humanity with the truth of how our deep connection to each other has been violated?

The divisions in our country are generational—and they cut deep into politics, religion, education, health care, every day living, and even the self-understanding we have deep within ourselves.

The wounds run so deep that we’ve lost track of the thing that divides us—so much so that our understanding of the division itself is skewed. It hurts to see how deep it’s gone so we blame it on superficial things like who you are going to vote for in the next election.

Those allegiances are only symptoms of a much deeper wound—a primal place where we have forgotten how to belong to each other.

Paul had a deep love for the Corinthian church—that faith community was near and dear to his heart. Imagine an emerging movement in that diverse city of people coming together in Christ’s name—people coming together to live differently, to live for and with each other.

Paul had been their teacher, their guide. He had helped them get on their feet. He knew them by name. He knew their families, their stories. He rejoiced in a group as disparate and diverse as the Corinthian church coming together in Christ’s name for love and for the freedom that only Christ can give us.

So imagine his pain and disappointment, his concern and even his irritation, when he began hearing reports out of Corinth that the church was going off the rails.

Far from a love-filled community of mutual regard and care, the Corinthian church was gaining a reputation for its deep divisions. And they were divisions based on wealth, based on social position, based on power hoarding and resource hoarding.

The community was fracturing because of the way the wealthy and powerful were treating those without wealth and influence.

The community was talking about their division in ways that pinned the blame on who their favorite teachers were, or who their favorite preachers were, or who had baptized them. But those were just symptoms of a deeper wound. Far from beloved community, the Corinthian church was fast becoming a reflection of the culture that it was supposed to transform.

Paul wrote several letters to this church he loved and cared about so deeply. And he told them the truth about the harm they were inflicting. It is clear as this particular letter goes on, that Paul's concern was not about the existence of disagreements. His problem was the existence of an active disregard for the humanity of some in the community.

But our ears so easily hear a condemnation of the more superficial ways we are different. We so quickly can get distracted and think this passage and this letter means that we should never disagree or have different perspectives or have any tension between us about the best way forward.

Paul very clearly does not have a problem with differences or with the unique gifts and perspectives we each bring to community.

Paul's grief about this community's division goes to the roots of their self-understanding. They must all share the mind of Christ—the mind of Christ is their connective tissue, it is what empowers them to be together in their differences with practices of mutual regard, genuine care, and radical love. The mind of Christ is what informs their capacity to practice beloved community every time they are together.

The mind of Christ is what teaches them to see imbalances of power and seek to share power instead. The mind of Christ is what stirs their souls with compassion for each other. The mind of Christ is what moves them to feel for and with their siblings in Christ.

Paul uses the word for brothers and sisters 38 times in 1 Corinthians—2 times more than it is used in any other Pauline letter.

Paul is talking about a deep existential, ontological, even biological connection that Christian community must embody. We belong to each other as brothers and sisters, as siblings—tangled up with each other by bonds that we didn't choose and that we can't change.

We can't stop being connected to each other just because we disagree or even when we hurt each other. We are always and forever connected. Our community is wounded when we deny that in the ways we treat each other. Our community is

wounded when we act as if our behavior does not have the power to wound another.

Perhaps the most important layer of Paul's astute description of the Corinthian church is in his power analysis.

Paul understands that the way power is held and deployed and weaponized and practiced in a community is key to naming what needs transforming. In other words, not everyone bears the same weight of the impact of the community's distortions. The poor bear the brunt. Those with less social capital bear the brunt. Those with fewer friends in high places bear the brunt.

The divisions that threaten to destroy the Corinthian church are not their political allegiances, but the way those allegiances lead people to regard others as less than or unworthy of full participation in the community's abundance.

It is the truth of the cross that is getting lost in Corinth—the lengths that love goes for its beloved, the depths of God's claim in our lives, the shared identity that Christ seals in us as children of God. The cross is about love and love's liberating power.

To a world based on wealth and status, the cross is foolishness. To those who have tasted the cross's freedom and radical love, it is everything that we were made to be together. It is our primal connection to God's love and to each other.

There are lots of ways to position yourself in an argument. Just recall arguments that you've had lately.

There's defensiveness.

There's the passive aggressive approach.

There's sarcasm. And then there are personal attacks.

There's avoidance. There's being dismissive or ridiculing the concern of the other.

There's demonizing the other.

There's disassociating—not really being present in the tension.

There's writing people off.

And there's that feeling of being demoralized, like nothing really matters anymore.

These are all strategies that can make us feel protected—at least for the moment. And sometimes in an argument that's our gut reaction—to protect ourselves. And in some arguments, we may need protection.

Remember Paul's power analysis? All arguments are not equal. Sometimes there is a lot at stake. Sometimes there is danger. Sometimes our bodies just shut down for lots of reasons.

As Christians, we must always carry with us a critical understanding of power in every encounter we have with each other. How is it present? How do we share it? How is it concentrated? But the most important layer of our power analysis must be our trust in God's unique power to inhabit our tension, our conflict, our disagreements with a healing opportunity.

God's power is unique and persuasive. God's power is always deployed for our well-being and our good growth. And God's power is always present inviting us to see God's face in the face of every person, and to believe that they see God in us.

This is the mind of Christ.

Being of the mind of Christ means we seek the truth, but we do not seek vengeance. We seek reparation and healing, but not retaliation and not to do harm.

Our divisions need revision—our divisions need us to see them more clearly for what they are. The problem is not our differences of opinion or perspective, the problem is when we deny each other's humanity.

And racism and homophobia and sexism and xenophobia and ignoring differently abled bodies and seeing vulnerability as an opportunity to take advantage of someone—these are denials of humanity. These are not opinions; they are distortions of the only thing that can heal us—our shared humanity, our shared reliance on each other, our shared lot in life.

The words forgiveness and reconciliation don't do justice to this reality that is ours. We belong to each other—and living as if that is not true will destroy us all—not just some of us, but all of us will languish and perish when we deny that we belong to each other.

The revision of our division involves our own resilience. We can sit with tension. We can live with disagreement and differences. Our unity is not in sameness. Our unity is in what we see when we look at each other and when we look in the mirror—God's good creation.

Doing our own inner work helps to heal that defensive part of us that struggles to trust God's healing opportunities. If God's invitation is for us to live into our deep connection with each other, then we all have to learn how not to take things too

personally. We have to learn how to see ourselves in a bigger, deeper, broader context in this world—not as individuals vying for influence and power, but as a human family yearning to be in right relationship with each other and with God.

A mother in England, we'll call her Anne, had three children that she loved with every fiber of her being. Her marriage was abusive. And she knew that she would die if she stayed. After years of trying to figure out ways to survive, she decided she had to leave. And her husband, out of revenge and resentment, fought to keep her away from the children.

He succeeded. And for years she was cut off from her beloved children. Eventually when her children were old enough to make their own decisions, they wrote their mother off. Having been filled with their father's narrative of who their mother was, they cut her off themselves.

During that time she wailed the guttural sounds of a grieving mother. She prayed. She beat herself up. She second-guessed herself. And she did the hard work of exploring her hardest emotions and the hard work of finding ways to be well in the midst of this pain.

Anne slowly grew into someone who could love herself and love her children from afar. She would picture them and cherish them and pray that that love somehow reached them.

It would be years later when Anne's adult daughter reached out and said she wanted to talk to her. After all those years, Anne was elated to hear her daughter's voice. They agreed on a time for her daughter to come to Anne's house.

The visit was excruciating. Anne's daughter unloaded all of her anger, all of her hurt, all of the blame and shame she could muster onto her mom. She told her mom that she just wanted to say these things to her but she wanted nothing to do with her. She was no longer her mother.

All that love that Anne had been cultivating within her and toward her children all those years, all that healing work she had done, filled her with the capacity to be present to her daughter. She could feel the pain of the wounds they shared--the wounds that came from violence, from trauma, from the loss that comes from broken relationship.

So she listened. And she could see her daughter as a little girl. Hurt, afraid, feeling abandoned. When Anne's daughter was finished with her hard truth telling to her mom, filled with what Anne knew was false information and with so much that her daughter didn't know. Anne took a deep breath and smiled through tears at her daughter.

“Thank you for telling me how you feel,” Anne said. “I am grateful that you trust me with this pain. It is so good to be with you. It is so good to see you and to hear your voice. I am glad you are here.”

Anne chose connection over setting the record straight in that moment of their shared vulnerability.

It would take years, but eventually Anne and her children would share life together again. Their differences never fully resolved, but they found ways to be connected, to belong to each other.

This Table is about our belonging—we belong to God and we belong to each other—and we belong in a world that knows how to honor our God-given uniqueness. This is place where we learn the taste of enough, the taste of tender mercies, and the taste of our deep connection with all that is.

Let us feel the joy of Christ’s generous invitation to be in Communion with God and with each other by singing a song to each other of our mutual regard and our mutual need for beloved community—yearning to taste and see again the love that will not let us go.

Thanks be to God.