

Futile Faith
February 17, 2019
New Philadelphia Moravian Church

Over the last few Sundays, we have been focusing on the beginning of Jesus' ministry- from his baptism, to the wedding at Cana, to preaching and teaching in Galilee, to his getting run out of his hometown synagogue, to finally calling his first disciples. But today we are going to shift gears a bit and focus more on the Epistle lesson than on the Gospel.

But before we get to the Corinthians passage, I want to talk first about the New Testament in general. We have been talking about the New Testament in Confirmation Class lately and I want to make sure that they are paying attention. We have learned how the 27 books that make up the NT fit into two basic categories- Gospels and Epistles, with two other books that are unique to themselves.

The Gospels are divided into the Synoptic (from Greek and Latin meaning "seen together") Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) which all have the same basic story line and the Johannine Gospel (John) which doesn't. The Epistles are divided into the letters written to churches (Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, etc), the letters written to specific people (Timothy, Titus, Philemon) and the general Epistles (James, Peter, the letters of John, Jude). And the unique books are Acts and Revelation. Acts was written by the same author as Luke's gospel but it is so different that it stands alone. And Revelation was written by the same author as the Gospel and letters of John, but it is nothing at all like them.

Even taking into account that some people wrote multiple books (Paul, Luke, John) the 27 books of the New Testament were still written by a minimum of eight different people. That gives us at least eight different points of view, eight different interpretations, eight different motives, eight different understandings. So it is almost

impossible to say that the New Testament speaks with a single voice on any topic or any issue. Except for the voice of God.

It is important to remember that each book of the New Testament was written at a certain time for a specific place to different groups in order to serve a distinct purpose. The issues that they deal with and address are unique to the time, place, people, and purpose. Yet when we believe that they are inspired by God and guided by the Holy Spirit, then the truths that they reveal and convey are not unique but are universal. They speak to all people in all places at all times.

One of our tasks as followers of Jesus, as Christians, is to differentiate between the specific and the universal; it is to separate the universal truth from the specific issue. And it is not an easy task at all. Most of the great controversies of the church are rooted in the struggle to understand and fulfill this very task.

Even from the very beginning, the earliest Christians struggled with whether or not to share the good news of Jesus with Gentiles. The role of women in the church has been an issue that has been a challenge throughout the history of Christianity; then of course there were the struggles over slavery in the 19th century and civil rights in the 20th century; and our present day struggle with the issue of homosexuality and same sex marriage.

The one thing that all of these disparate issues have in common is that people of faith have struggled to discern whether or not it is one that is a specific issue or a universal truth. While today we may wonder why there was such a big deal about sharing the good news of Jesus with Gentiles (with all people), or how anyone could justify slavery, we have to remember that in those times and those days, they were tremendously significant. And dealing with them was just as painful then as dealing with the issue of homosexuality is for us today.

Now I am sure that many of you are tired of hearing about this issue, are tired of dealing with it, talking about it, struggling with it. And so I am. And to be honest, it wasn't what I had planned to preach on this week at all. But it is how the Spirit has led me. So I hope that you will listen to me with open hearts, open minds, and open ears. And I hope that you won't be too disappointed with what I have to say. Because for some people it is not going to be enough, for some it is going to be too much, and for some it is not going to be anything at all.

Because I am not going to tell you that I think that what the Bible says about homosexuality and same sex marriage is a universal truth meant for all that we have to strictly adhere to. And I'm not going to tell you that what the Bible says about it is a specific commandment for a certain time and a certain place that is not meant for us now. I'm not going to tell you because I don't know. It is still not clear for me. I know that for many of you, it is clear, whichever way you see it, whichever side you fall on. And I won't question that, I won't dispute you for what you believe. But for me, I think that it is one of those things that is still being revealed among us and to us and through us.

So where does that leave us, both in the context of this sermon and in the context of where we are as God's people at New Philadelphia and the Moravian Church? For me, it leaves me with hope. That may sound strange given the level of frustration that many people, including me, are feeling on this issue. But bear with me, I hope that it is all coming together and that you will see what I see.

Despite the turmoil and frustration that this issue is causing us, I see hope. And there are a couple of reasons for that hope. The first really doesn't have much to do with us, it is not dependent on what we do or think or say. But the second is all about us. It is dependent on what we do and think and say. So let's look at these reasons for hope in the face of this great challenge.

The first is that we have been here before. Maybe not New Philadelphia but the church has been here before. If you look at all of the controversial issues that I have mentioned- over sharing the Gospel with all people, over the role of women, over slavery and Civil Rights, through them all the church has survived. And not only has it survived, it has become the church that God intends it to be.

It may not be the church that people have thought it would be or hoped it would be or wanted it to be, but it is the church that God intends it to be and creates it to be and needs it to be. I believe this. God is always at work in ways that we can not see, we can not know, we can not comprehend. God is always doing more than we can ever dare to ask or imagine. We just have to place our trust in him. We have to place our hope on him.

For when we stop letting the church be formed in the image of God and try to form it in our image, when we try to make it what we think it should be or want it to be or hope it will be, then it becomes our church and not God's church. And that happens. It has happened before, it has happened often over the 2000 years that there has been a church. Yet the church has survived. It has survived because God's desire is greater than our desire. It has survived because God's will is greater than ours. It has survived because God's plans are greater than our plans.

We read in Isaiah: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.* For myself, I am convinced that the church is an important, an essential part of God's thoughts, God's ways, God's thoughts, God's plans.

Throughout history, God has made himself known to humanity, he has established relationships with people in different ways. The first, as we read in the Old Testament, was through the Law. The OT Law, beginning with the Ten Commandments, were what set the people of God apart from others. It was the sign of the covenant between God and his people. By adhering to the Law, those who believed in God were different from those who did not believe. Following the Law was what allowed humanity to enter into the presence of God. God dwelled among those who lived the Law that He gave them.

The second way that God has made himself known to humanity is the Incarnation. The covenant that God made through the Law was a limited covenant. It kept people apart, those inside and those outside. And ultimately, all who violated the Law, all who sinned, all who fell short of the glory of God, found themselves on the outside of the covenant. And ALL violated the Law, all sinned, all fell short of God's glory.

God was ready for a new way, an unlimited covenant. He wanted all people to come to him. So he came to them. He became one of us. He became one of his people, he joined his own creation. God made himself known to us by literally becoming one of us, by becoming flesh and dwelling among us. When we look at Jesus, we see God

God dwelled among us in Jesus. When God chose to limit his divinity by assuming our humanity, God knew that He wouldn't be on earth forever. Humanity by definition is limited. The human body dies. Even though God knew that through Jesus, death would be overcome, sin would be defeated, God also knew that the resurrected Jesus would return to heaven. And that the world would need another place to look to see Jesus, to see him.

This brings us to the third way that God makes himself known to humanity, the current way. And that is the church. The church was born among the followers of Jesus after he ascended into heaven and the Holy Spirit descended upon them. The church is where believers gather together to pray and to praise, to hear and to share the word of God, to learn and to live the love of Jesus. It is where believers are called in to be strengthened to be sent out. The church is where the world looks to see God and to know Jesus.

The church is the dwelling place of God on earth, that is why it is essential to God's plans. That is why he won't let the church fade away and die but he will lead and guide the church on earth until his plans are fulfilled, until that day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Until the new heaven and new earth become a present reality. As shown to John in his revelation: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."*

Until this day, until the first things pass away, God needs the church. God dwelled on earth through the Law, through Jesus, and now through the church. So that is one reason why I have hope in the church, despite our struggles and challenges. God will keep the church and make the church the church that he needs until it is no longer needed at all. And as I said, it is not at all dependent on us, on what we do or don't do, what we say or don't say. It is dependent on God. But the other reason that I have hope depends on us. It depends on us being the church.

This brings us back to the passage from Corinthians. This is one of those passages that is without a doubt a universal truth, something that applies to all people at all times in all places. What Paul is writing to the Corinthians about the resurrection is the very essence of our faith. It is the one thing, above all others, that the church is called to do. That is to proclaim that Christ has been raised from the dead, that the Lord is risen indeed.

I have hope, no matter what, no matter what challenges us or threatens us or attacks us or tries to tear us apart, I have a confident hope that we will continue to proclaim the resurrection. It is the one thing that we can do, one thing that we can all agree upon- that the Lord is risen indeed. The church has done so for 2000 years, ever since Mary Madgalene discovered the empty tomb, the church has told the world that Jesus is risen from the dead. That he is the first fruits of those who have died and that all who believe in him will not perish but will have everlasting life. And when we proclaim this universal truth, then we are being the church that God created us to be, that God needs us to be, that the world looks to when they want to see God. This is the ultimate mission of the church.

So let us keep on doing that. Let us not get so distracted by all the other stuff, as important as it may seem, that we forget to be who we are, that we stop being the church. Let us place our hopes for the future, for the church, for the world, not on ourselves but on our God, on our Savior, and on his church.

And as long as we keep doing this, as long as we keep proclaiming that the Jesus is risen from the dead, then the church will survive and our faith is not futile. So despite all the challenges that face us, the uncertainty that lies ahead, we can have hope. We just need to keep doing what we are called to do and proclaiming the resurrection of Christ from the dead. And everything else will be alright.