

26 June 2022

How Not to Church 1 Corinthians 6:1-8

We read today from Paul's first letter to a church he had founded just a few years earlier in Corinth. Our passage is 1 Corinthians 6, verses 1-8:

6 When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to court before the unrighteous, instead of taking it before the saints? 2Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? 3Do you not know that we are to judge angels—to say nothing of ordinary matters? 4If you have ordinary cases, then, do you appoint as judges those who have no standing in the church? 5I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to decide between one believer and another, 6but a believer goes to court against a believer—and before unbelievers at that?*

7 In fact, to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? 8But you yourselves wrong and defraud—and believers at that.

I'm coming to believe that the book of 1 Corinthians was included in our scriptures as a part of God's wise providence, to make sure that we know that we can't screw up the church more today than has already been tried. There is hardly a church problem you can come up with that this 1st century band of believers didn't beat us to. Got a church divided around personality cults? Corinth did it first. Sex scandals? Been there; done that. Well, how about self-righteous super-spiritual snots getting all arrogant about their superior "spiritual gifts," the way some were doing in the 1970s? Snort. 1970s indeed. Try the zero-zero-fifties in Corinth! Well, how about church members suing each other in civil courts? So ahead of you.

Wait, what? Christians suing each other? Yeah, Corinth did that. You can almost hear the weary despair in Paul's tone when he asks, "What's the matter with you? Don't you have anyone in the church who can help sort out a disagreement? You have to go to the Roman magistrate? Really? 'Hi, we're Christians, followers of the Son of God who came to bring forgiveness to the world, but that guy dumped trash on my lawn!' Oh, yeah, that's a great look."

But beyond the question of how it looks to the rest of the world – which *does* matter – there's a deeper question. Paul asks, "Why couldn't you settle it yourselves?" and that's worth considering. Given that taking someone to court is itself a huge hassle, why *do* people do that instead of working it out privately? Well, you could say, maybe they tried but nothing else worked, but that's no help, because then you have to ask, "Why did nothing else work?" Here are some of my thoughts on why people might resort to lawsuits: Because they are so angry that they can't talk to the other person anymore; because they feel they can no longer trust the other's word; or because they no longer just want the dispute settled but also want the other person punished. In other words, one reason that people go to court is because a relationship has deteriorated past reclaim. Then I suppose we have to note that there are some personality weaknesses that incline someone to lawsuits. For instance, people whose fragile self-esteem can never admit being wrong, even a little, will be unable to compromise and will soon be driven to

this last resort. Maybe you can think of people like that. So it would appear that in the church at Corinth there were either some utterly toxic relationships, or some utterly toxic people, or both.

Last Sunday I began this sermon series with the title, “They’ll Know We Are Christians by ...” and in last week’s message, from John 13, we saw how Jesus answered that question: “By this shall all know you are my disciples, that you love one another.” So this week and next week I’m trying to flesh out what love for our fellow Christians looks like, and today I’m setting the low bar: At least don’t be like the Corinthians. Don’t be vindictive, punitive, distrustful, resentful, and don’t put getting your way over everything else. All those things that we listed as reasons that might lead to lawsuits? Don’t let things get to that point. Don’t be like that. Don’t be those people. Don’t be a narcissist. Don’t be an internet troll. Don’t be the awful person who lets his dog poop on the neighbor’s front yard and then leaves it. Don’t be the customer who demands that the restaurant manager fire the exhausted server who didn’t meet your standards. Don’t be that person in the supermarket line. Don’t be that driver. Just don’t be jerks, all right?

And when you have arguments with each other, for God’s sake – literally, for God’s sake – sort them out yourself, all right? Is that really so hard?

Notice that I said *when* you have arguments, not *if*. Paul doesn’t say that we should never have disagreements. He’s not that naïve. He’s only concerned that the church at Corinth can’t seem either to resolve or to live with them. I think this is worth pausing over. There is a pernicious idea that Christian unity involves being in agreement with each other. This is nonsense; we don’t and never will. But I still hear it all the time, usually in reference to our many different denominations (with new ones being formed as we speak!). I hear, “Why do we have to have all these different churches? Why can’t we all just agree?” As if the fact that people read scripture differently or have differing pictures of God were some sort of embarrassing weakness on our part. It’s not; it’s inevitable. Whether by nature or nurture or both, we are all different from each other – some of us *quite* different. If unity means “thinking the same way and agreeing on every issue,” then as far as I’m concerned, unity is neither possible nor desirable. I don’t *want* Christianity to be that bland. I was once on a committee assigned to put together an Interfaith Worship Service that would please everyone. “Could we avoid any explicit reference to Jesus? Some of our people would be offended.” Well, we did it. We came up with a completely inoffensive worship service, and all we had to do was cut out everything that could possibly have been considered worth saying. It was an hour of depressingly generic, meaningless spiritual word-salad blather. I would much rather attend a worship service of a church or faith that I disagreed with entirely than sit through another hour like that. At least there I’d hear things worth thinking about, spoken with conviction. No, if we have any ideas at all, then it is inevitable that someone will disagree with us.

I know of no way, short of mass congregational lobotomies, to avoid all disagreements within a church. They’re going to happen. The question is not How do we avoid them? but What do we do with them short of taking them to court? Here’s Paul’s suggestion: “Have you tried letting the other person win?” No, seriously, that’s what he says: “Why not rather be wronged? Why not let yourself be taken advantage of?”

Now some of you are already saying to yourselves, “I’ll tell you why not. If you let them walk over you today, they’ll take it as weakness and do it again.” And that may – or may not – be sound advice in most places, but remember that Paul is talking to the church of Jesus Christ, which theoretically is not supposed to be most places. *And* remember that he’s talking to

everyone, not just to one party in a fight. He's telling *everyone* involved in a dispute to put the other person first. Think about that: What would happen to a disagreement in which *both* sides began with the attitude that it is better to lose an argument than to lose a relationship? What would happen if *both* sides were more willing to concede defeat than to remain angry? That's not a dispute anymore, is it? It's a conversation.

That's what the church is supposed to be: a place filled with people who care more about listening to others' views than proclaiming their own. People whose first impulse is to be forgiving rather than punitive. People who'd rather love than win. The church is going to be just as full as differing personalities and opposing opinions as anywhere else in the world, but it shouldn't *feel* like it, because at the most basic, meets-minimum-qualifications level of being the church, those people aren't jerks to each other.

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I'm aware of a certain irony of preaching this sermon in a United Methodist Church. We are, by most accounts, about to split into at least two different denominations and maybe many more. I'm not going to pretend that that disciplined Methodist elephant is not in the room. For those who are unfamiliar with our current situation, the United Methodist Church has been fighting for decades now about how and to what extent to receive gay, lesbian, and transgender people into our fellowship. This congregation, like many others, has stood strongly for full inclusion of all people, and we practice that, but our Church rules have not agreed with us. The UMC was poised for an explosion at a big meeting in the summer of 2020, which, like most things in 2020, got canceled. Now we're gearing up for a meeting in 2024, and at least one group, called the Global Methodist Church, has already issued press releases about forming an alternative "traditional" Methodist denomination. So we're looking at a strong possibility of a split.

Now, what I'm about to say is purely my own thoughts, which I neither ask nor expect anyone else to agree with, but as it happens I'm the one with a microphone right now. I have just preached against divisions in the church between angry, opposing groups who care more about being right more than about being loving, so you might expect me to be against the possibility of a church split. But I'm not. You might think I would like our warring factions to just bury the hatchet and learn to co-exist. But I don't, really. What I'm opposed to is not division itself but the anger and resentment and vindictiveness and plotted retribution that generally accompany church divisions. (And yes, I know what I'm talking about here. I'm a former Southern Baptist. This is not my first rodeo.) The question I wish we could ask, and that I have a faint hope that we *might* ask, is not "Which group is right?" or "What do we have to do stay together?" but rather, "How can both of our very different groups best follow our own understanding of our call to minister to a broken world?" I'm fairly sure that staying together in one denomination and staging another cage match every four years at General Conference is not the best plan for either group.

I have friends in the opposing camp in our church dispute, and I could not disagree with them more completely on issues of sexuality. But, as I said, they are my friends. We don't disagree because I'm right and they're wrong. We disagree because our minds work differently, we read scripture differently, we take different passages of scripture as our starting places, and we find peace and meaning in different aspects of our faith. These friends and I probably should *not* serve together in the same congregation; our ministry priorities are different. But, again, different is not a flaw; it's a feature. Rancor and suspicion and distrust are flaws. Maybe

Methodists can find a way to sort out our different opinions and varying priorities, and if necessary arrange an amicable parting of ways, while still showing love.

Then people will know we are Christians.

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Final word: There's a story about President Calvin Coolidge, that one day he went to church but his wife wasn't feeling well and stayed home. When Coolidge returned, she asked him what the preacher talked about. He looked up from his paper and said, "Sin." His wife sighed and said, "Yes, dear. And what did he *say* about sin?" Her husband replied, "He's against it." I feel a little bit like that preacher today. I've spent our sermon time basically saying, "Don't be jerks." I hope it was unnecessary, but I was setting the low bar. Next week we'll go a little farther.