

"Following"
Matt 4:12-23; 1 Cor. 1:10-18
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Once again today the lectionary offers a word
that fits our circumstances in an almost uncanny way.
The offering from Paul to the church in Corinth is about
not declaring oneself a follower of this or that leader,
but coming together in unity around the cross of Christ,
while the gospel lesson from the start of Jesus' ministry
is both a call to individuals
and an announcement to the nations of Jesus' purposes.
This on an inaugural weekend when
feelings and divisions in the US
and around the world are running high.
Images from Friday's inauguration events
and Saturday's Women's Marches in multiple cities have
filled our cellphone, computer and TV screens.
Some pointedly watched one day and not the other,
while others watched neither day and others watched it all.
In my lifetime there have never been
as many people marching
on the day following a presidential inauguration engaging in marches.
But in the time I watched the news
it seemed to me that commentators
whose job it is to match images with insight
fell back on old scripts rather than offer
much of anything enlightening or new.

Is there anything new on the way
as the word "inauguration" suggests?
That is a key question this morning.
If there is, scripture tells us again and again and again and again
that newness is ever God-filled and good,
even newness that is deeply unwanted.

Is something new on the way
or have we just inaugurated a season
trying to turn the clock backward
to an era of America First,
as if there is no global economy,
or a widely multiethnic American population?

Will placing the government in the hands
of billionaire businessmen and women
lead to a government that runs like a profitable,

stream-lined enterprise and thus be good for the nation,
as many firmly believe,
or will we discover that what is good for business
is not the same as what makes for good or wise government,
as so many others assert?

It was very helpful to me during Trump's inauguration address
to hear him quote Psalm 133:

“...how good and pleasant it is
when God’s people live together in unity.”ⁱ
and after that he added, “We must speak our minds openly,
debate our disagreements honestly,
but always pursue solidarity.”ⁱⁱ

Words I pray that our president and our people will live into.

One of you asked me during the week
what the sermon topic would be this morning.

When I said "unity" you groaned.

"I don't like that word," you told me,
because my feelings are often not in line
with other peoples' feelings
and a I don't even want them to be."

I understand and align myself with that sentiment,
which is actually matched with the word uniformity not the word unity.

Fortunately, when it comes to being the Church,
the Reformers were not interested in uniformity either.

Our tradition does not believe that we are gathered in this room
because we think alike about anything.

We believe Christ himself forms people
into particular congregations in particular times,
where we are called to share openly and honestly
what is on our hearts, so that the Spirit of God can then use *every voice*
to guide us toward God's will.

This emphasis on hearing various voices
is one of the most central tenets of the Reformed Tradition.

I sometimes like to share this action of Christ
with people who are church shopping,
going from service to service
to find a "comfortable" church that seems to fit
their idea of what they want. And I understand that.
But, as with politics, what we want
and what is wise may not be the same thing.

In the Letter to the church at Corinth

Paul has barely gotten started with his letter before
he dresses down little groups of followers

who are letting their loyalty to particular parties and personalities
cause disruption in the church.
Some preferred Paul because he was their founding missionary.
Others preferred Apollos, the minister who had been there most recently
and whose overall smarts, voice, eloquence,
and knowledge of scripture were very impressive.
I bet he was even good looking.
Still others had apparently turned
to the original apostles for guidance,
picking Cephas, which Aramaic for Peter, which means "Rock",
Peter is a Greek term. So they picked Cephas, Peter,
as their key leader.
Finally there were those who said they were "for Christ,"
but Paul lumps them in with the rest probably because they were
making arrogant and exclusive claims.
In other words, even using the right name or the right cliché
is meaningless if it's used to hurt and divide instead of build-up.
I can think of countless people, and I bet you can too, in other congregations
who've caused real harm by basing their loyalty on
a founding pastor or a former pastor
or who announced that they were going back to the Bible,
or that they only understand what Jesus really meant.
The cure for the mess, says Paul,
is unity of purpose as followers of Christ.
Christ as we see him, self-giving on the cross.
Paul asks the church to follow and claim that dying and rising kind of life.
To be unified around the cross of Christ.
Now again, unity is not uniformity.
Look unity up and you'll find that it is
the quality or state of being joined as a whole.
That automatically implies complexity and differences.
To be of the same mind in Christ does not require
making our theology line up with each other in rigid rows.
Instead, the true test of Christian unity, writes one commentator,
is the ability to disagree about what makes for truth
without compromising our ultimate loyalty to Christ
--and our loyalty to each other.ⁱⁱⁱ

There is a wonderful documentary about music.
It was made a little over ten years ago.
It's called Music From the Inside Out.
And in it the filmmakers interviewed
various members of the Philadelphia Orchestra,
asking each of them what music is.
The responses came from every imaginable direction.
Not surprisingly many of these world class musicians

spoke of music as a community endeavor
and talked about what it means
to make music as part of an orchestra.

The composer calls for certain things; the conductor for certain things.
Some musicians, said the principal violinist/concertmaster, David Kim,
simply do what the conductor asks for with no questions or qualms.
Others do what is asked for but not without an inner struggle
because they have their own strong views
about how a piece should be played.
Still others, said Kim, allow a hint of their own interpretation
to color or spill over into what's been asked for
and it is the union of all these tensions and variations
that comprise a truly great performance.^{iv}

It is almost startling to realize how close this is
to the reformed understanding of the responsibility of church members
to speak up and share what's in their hearts
so the Church as a whole, as a unity
can sort and discern and hear and follow God's leading.

Another dictionary definition of the word unity
is the quality or state of being *made* one.
It's a lot like being joined as one.
If you're going to be made one that means there is a maker.
In the deepest sense Christian unity is something Christ does in us.
Our unity is accomplished in our baptism.
It is already present, waiting to be realized
rather than something that has to be created by human effort.
Whether unity becomes explicit
depends on the way we interact with each other.

The stories in Matthew this morning also have to do, ultimately,
with people being made into one community by Christ.
Matthew ties Jesus to Old Testament prophecy.
He announces that a light has come to the land of Gentiles
and gives a summary of Jesus travels and
message about the kingdom of heaven
and the story of the calling of his first four disciples.
The call and response to the four men is sudden and immediate,
and that is less about them or about us and more about Jesus' power
to form a community of those who will,
in turn, attract and welcome others.
All the place names in the text and the exaggerated use
of the word every—curing every disease,
every sickness—reveals the boundlessness
of the one community Jesus forms

and calls us to keep on forming.
Keeping our boundaries open too.

So what kind of followers do we want to be?

The kind Paul would criticize for harming the church
because of loyalty to personalities?

Or followers of a Christ who calls you to hold your own opinions
but speak them out loud, in other words go fishing,
so that together the church can hear every voice
and honestly assess what God is calling us to do?

Do we want to be made one with other baptized people?

The degree to which we are one will depend on how we interact,
as members of political tribes
or as people who hear Christ's call and immediately
put his purposes at the top of our list.

Are we even going to agree about what that means?

Absolutely not!

But uniformity is not what's needed.

Unity from complexity is the promise
of being a follower of Christ, and he is calling our names. AMEN.

ⁱ The Bible, Psalm 133: v. 1, New International Version.

ⁱⁱ Found in print online. It was good hear the "unity Psalm" quoted after many paragraphs about what Trump sees as the shaky state of American families, industries, infrastructure, employment, and manufacturing.

ⁱⁱⁱ Craddock , *et al*, *Preaching Through the Christian Year A*, Trinity Press International, Harrisonburg PA, 1992, p. 92

^{iv} David Kim, Concertmaster, Philadelphia Orchestra, documentary film "Music From the Inside Out", 2005.