

Who is on your Team?

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The more things change the more they stay the same. Throughout time, humans have this basic need to belong. It is hard-wired into our brains. There is safety and security in a group. We human beings sometimes take belonging to extremes. Like when we belong so that we can exclude others in our midst. Brain scientists have done scans and the intensity of an internal reaction is marked when persons see a picture of someone different than they. I am sure that deep within our ancestry that kind of information helped them survive. Are you a friend or foe? If you are like me then you must be safe.

In the reading today, you can feel Paul's frustration. The church in Corinth is not in a good place. There is division and squabbling in their newly founded gatherings. They are not all on the same team. Paul takes them to task telling them that they need to make a course adjustment in how they view themselves and others. Let us listen for God's words in the reading of

I Corinthians 3:1-9:

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

When we first moved to Minnesota from Illinois, I was ready to try all things Minnesotan. Two years ago, when the caucuses rolled around, I was ready to go. We do not have such things in Illinois! On the appointed night, I went to the local High School and sat in a classroom with my precinct. Since there were only 9 people who showed up and 12 delegates needed for the District Caucus, I was elected as a delegate.

On a Saturday morning in March, I went to another high school in the area, this time to the cafeteria and I found many folks full of energy. The more experienced ones told me “Just wait. The fun begins when the roving caucus happens. It is controlled chaos!” After some business, more than a few politicians “drop by.” Then the roving caucus began. Any delegate can create a cause or support a candidate with a poster board. They can make a sign, hold it up and try to get people to be on their team. It was pandemonium as the rest of us have five minutes to decide whose team we are on. People started calling us over and yelling why we should join their team. I was not sure I wanted to support a particular candidate at that time. The causes were everything from legalizing marihuana, to lowering the drinking age, to promoting clean energy. What to do? What to do? There were a few people in a corner with a sign that said, “Save our Planet.” I could agree with that. I walked over and joined a team. However, we were not done yet. The next step was to make our cause viable enough to be able to send delegates to the state convention. Who wanted to give up either cause or person to join ours? That is when the cheers and shouts began in earnest. Finally, our small group convinced a larger group, representing the younger members of the party, to come and help us save the planet. It was a heady moment when twenty-five 18-25-year-olds marched across the cafeteria to join us. I took selfies to show my children how cool I was that I was now on the young people’s team to save the planet!

That day in the high school cafeteria showed me how easily we divide into groups. Our group got mad at the other environmental groups that would not join our team to save the planet. We scoffed at the other groups that did not think as big or as globally as we did. In addition, we cheered when the large young group joined us and not THEM.

We were neighbors and Minnesotans, voting Americans, following one of the two major parties. How we can be divided so easily and how our loyalty to our team solidified so quickly was mind boggling to me. Whether you have ever had

the experience of a political caucus or not you know about defining yourself by group or an affinity. I will never forget the choir's reaction at a Wisconsin church I served. I mispronounced Brett Favre's name back when he was green Bay's beloved quarterback! I thought I would have to leave and never come back!

Our tribalism is as hard-wired as it was back in the gatherings in Corinth. It is very easy to slip into division rather than unity. Paul came to Corinth around 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Corinth was a large prosperous city, which was active in trade from the Mediterranean Sea. It was a tolerant city, which encompasses many cultures and religions because of its cosmopolitan nature. Archeologists have found a variety of temples and shrines -- at least a dozen at the time when Paul was organizing the early Christians. It is clear that that there were Greek, Egyptian and the Roman religions. We can assume that the new congregation reflected the city: a few wealthy adherents but mostly poor from mixed cultures and races comprised of both Jews and Gentiles. The church in Corinth were seekers and people who did not mindlessly follow tradition. They were embracing the Good News of Jesus Christ, which was new and revolutionary. These folks were the pioneers who are not simply following along but trying a new way to live and following a new way to think about God. Even these wonderful religiously diverse trailblazers cannot help themselves but divide into teams in which it becomes an us verse them situation.

Paul is breaking the people of Corinth out of their boxes and reminding them why they are together and what is important. Paul wants the church in Corinth to come together for the love of God. Paul reminds them that they are of God who is the Creator of all. God who loves the world so much, who came to us through Jesus Christ to tell us to love God and to love neighbors and to love ourselves.

Our need to belong is not what is at issue here. It is with whom and where we choose to belong. It is a matter of whom we want on our team. We can narrow who belongs with us or we can expand it. Paul tells them to see themselves not in the narrow sense of who first taught them. See yourself as human beings. And see each other as children of God.

A way to expand our team is by being curious of others. This week on National Public radio there was a segment about a not-for-profit group called Parents for Peace. They opened with the stories of two former extremists, one was Muslim

and the other a white supremacist. Their stories had similarities. They were searching to find themselves and in the process they defined themselves in their hatred of others. They continued their stories on how they found their way back. The Muslim extremist, after 9/11, started to read the Koran, which opened his eyes that bringing justice was not through blowing up buildings in indiscriminate killing. The former white supremacist, a veteran of Afghanistan and Iraq, found his way, back after going down a dark path of narcotics and join the KKK. He admits before these two met and heard each other's story he had never known a person of Muslim faith. After they met, they found their common bond of parenting and desiring a safe place for their children. Through their own curiosity. They are now belonging to a new group not of hatred but through Parents for Peace.

We can expand the range of belonging by opening our circle in a way that defies including only those who are like us. Listening to others and their experiences leads us to what we have in common.

Who is on our team? Whom do we include in our lives? Are we seeking only a narrow view of people and excluding others because they do not agree with us? If our team is held together by the love of God, God does not love us alone.

In the season of primaries and caucuses and in this toxic atmosphere of ill will toward others who do not agree with us, we need to look at the group to which we adhere. The toxicity of putdowns and personal attacks can seep into our own way we live. It is important to find our footing and define ourselves as followers of the light, of God who loved the world so much God gave us Christ to show us the way. In a world where we would rather divide, so we can see who is on whose team, let us be the 21st century trailblazers that do not divide but unify. God, who through Christ, teaches us that being God's children is all that really counts.

Thanks be to God. Amen.