

8th Sunday of Pentecost

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

In today's Epistle reading, the Church takes us back to the days of the first Christian community in Corinth. This community was established by St. Paul himself during his missionary journeys. It was a community not unlike our own here at Christ the Savior, for it was growing in its call to witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the salvation offered through the descent of the Holy Spirit.

But this community in Corinth, like every community, had its struggles and challenges.

First, since Corinth was the seat of government for southern Greece under the Roman empire, when the Romans led their vicious persecutions against the Christians as they were known to do from time to time, the community found itself right smack in the lion's den. One could only imagine how difficult it must have been to witness to Jesus Christ, knowing that when the next persecution arose your head might be on the chopping block.

But even when times were peaceful, the Christians had the challenge of living in a city noted not only for its luxurious wealth but also for immorality as the people of Corinth were known as much for their vice and sinful habits as they were for their riches and power.

And so we see that the Christians of Corinth had some difficult challenges before them, both from the government and the society. However, St. Paul mentions none of these things when he addresses the Christians in today's Epistle. Rather he speaks to them about an even more important issue – he speaks to them about standing united in the face of temptation to disunity.

In the very first chapter of his first Epistle to the community in Corinth, St. Paul writes:

“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”

Then he goes on to say that he knows that there are divisions within their community, that he knows that there are factions – some saying that they are of Apollos, or Cephas, or Paul, or even some saying that they are of Christ as if others were not. And this internal factionalism he immediately exposes and addresses as a threat more dangerous and more damaging than anything the Romans could do through their persecution or the people of the city could do through their impious influence.

St. Paul asks the Corinthians: Who was crucified for you, and in whose name were you baptized? Was it not Christ who was crucified and were you not baptized in His name?

Then why are their divisions among you? Don't you know that Christ is not divided, but that you are all members of His One Body, that we have one Lord, one Faith, and one Baptism?

And then St. Paul even goes on to say that he is thankful that he himself didn't baptize any of the Christians in Corinth, except Crispus, Gaius, and the household of Stephanas, lest they attribute to him the loyalty and honor due solely to Christ.

And so we see that this issue of factionalism was of utmost importance for St. Paul as he sought to encourage the growth and stability of the mission community in Corinth.

Yet we mustn't think that this issue divided just the church in Corinth because it didn't. St. Paul often spoke about the need to drive from the Church what he called the "party spirit" – and by "party spirit" he wasn't talking about going out and having a good time (though this could be dangerous too, if it lacks moderation) but he was talking about the spirit which leads people to form parties or groups, little cliques or factions, within the unity of Christ's Church.

Brothers and sisters, the temptation to factionalism, the temptation of the "party spirit" is always before us. It is always before us because the devil knows that the only way he can overcome us is to separate us from Christ and each other, to sow discord within the community of believers.

It is no secret, and even the devil knows, that the Lord has called us not only to unity with Himself through His Church but also to unity with each other in brotherly and self-sacrificial love. This is why the Lord in His high priestly prayer asked His Father that His will be done "that all might be One." And it is for this reason that He offered Himself up to crucifixion, so that by being lifted up on the Cross He could draw all men to Himself.

In Corinth the temptation was to align oneself to different leaders in the community, to associate with certain groups, to mingle in certain circles. Yet this temptation was not able to undermine the growth and stability of the community because St. Paul exposed it and dealt with it. And he exposed and dealt with it, not by expelling people from the community, God forbid, but by encouraging all the members, each and everyone in the community, not just those in the factions, to be of the same mind and the same judgment, and to take up the same Cross of Jesus Christ.

You see what St. Paul knew, was that true unity could come through nothing other than the self denial of the Cross. He knew that one needed to be able to die to oneself and one's own ways to live to Christ and the ways of His Church. He knew that one needed to give up one's own individual ambitions and desires before one could acquire the mind of Christ and a willingness to do His will alone. He knew that we as Christians can only arrive at unity with God and each other through Christ. The more we are united to Christ, the more we will be united to each other. And the more we are genuinely united to each other, the more we will be united to Christ.

What does all this mean for us today?

It means that we need to identify the temptation to factionalism in all its forms, first within the household of the Faith, within our own Mission community, within the larger Orthodox Church in America, and with relation to the other Orthodox churches in Delmarva – with our Antiochian and Greek brothers and sisters to our north and south. And then within the social groups to which we belong, whether as family members, coworkers, neighbors, or just people walking the street as members of the one human race.

To do this we need to honestly ask ourselves a few questions: Are we doing everything we can to foster genuine brotherly love with others? Are we firmly resisting that evil whisper of disunity? We need to ask ourselves: How do my actions and words effect those in my community? Am I critical or judgmental? Do I avoid certain people? Are there people I bear a grudge against? Could I be part of a faction myself?

These are questions which are difficult to ask, and sometimes even more difficult to answer. But these questions are necessary if we are to overcome the temptation to divisiveness. This temptation is very serious and dangerous, and it has faced Christians since the beginning of the Church, and it will continue to face us till the unity of the Lord's Kingdom comes.

Let us overcome this temptation by not only resisting it, but actively working against it, by working to build up the unity of the Church. And how do we do this? Well, St. Paul tells us. He says that we all have been given gifts by God for the building up of the community and that we must use these gifts. He says that:

“We who are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification. Abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Be full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another [when necessary]. Abhor that which is evil; cling to that which is good. Be kindly affectionate with one another in brotherly love and honor; Not slothful in business, but fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.”

Brothers and sisters, let us heed the warnings of St. Paul regarding the temptation to disunity, and let us follow his instructions for the building up of the community. And let us realize that this is the Lord's will for us in all aspects of our lives – first in the Church, then in our homes, and finally in the world. Christ Himself prayed for this, that the Father's will be done, “that all may be One”. We can do no better than to have this prayer in our minds and hearts, and confirmed by our words and deeds.

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