

“Who We Are For And To Whom We Belong”

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Now I beseech you, brothers and sisters,
through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,
that all of you be in agreement
and that there be no divisions among you, but that you
having been joined together be united in the same mind
and the same purpose (opinion, resolve).

For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people
(those of Chloe's household) that there are
quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

What I mean is that each of you says,
“I am for Paul,” or “I am for Apollos,”
or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.”

Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you?
Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

I thank God that I baptized none of you
except Crispus and Gaius,
so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name.
(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas;
beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)

For Christ did not send so much send me to baptize
but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom,
so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

For the word about the cross is foolishness
to those who are perishing (on the road to perdition),
but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Who We Are For And To Whom We Belong

I Corinthians 1:10-18

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I.

I would like to begin this morning with two anecdotes and, then, ask you a question. As some of you are aware, recently I passed down my Honda CRV to our youngest son, Arlo, and purchased for my own use a bit of a beast of a pick-up truck which, while new to *me*, is actually 18 years old. (There is, of course, a long story about how the truck came to *be*, and to be *in* my possession, but that is a tale for another time).

Over Christmas our other son, Tucker, was in the cab checking out the truck when he reached over to pull out a drawer consisting of a removal metal tray with parallel ridges on the front lip and asked, “What is that?” I responded, “That, my son, is an ash tray.” Being located right next to a cigarette lighter provided Tucker no contextual clue as he knew full well that this is where one puts the USB charging doo-hickey.



II.

This past week, Linda participated in a small gathering of Hospice volunteers (heavily weighted with Presbyterians, I’m pleased to report, with Mary Garwood and Ellen Grayson also in attendance). The Volunteer Coordinator, who is quite young, began with a mixer exercise asking everyone to share what they wished their dream job to be when they were a kid. When it was Linda’s turn to answer she said, “Julie McCoy on the Love Boat,” which elicited great laughter; especially from those who know Linda and recognize this really isn’t too far off from the truth of who and what she has become. However, the Volunteer Coordinator simply stared back at everyone with a blank expression and said, “I have *no* idea who you are talking about?!?” and moved on.



III.

Now for the question: do you recognize and understand the meaning and intent of a particular physical gesture I am about to demonstrate? Since the sermon gets emailed out I am going to try to describe the gesture for those who read the sermon and will not have the benefit of a visual demonstration. With my right hand I'm going to point at you, the congregation. Then, I'm going to take my left arm and bend it at the elbow so my forearm is parallel to the ground with my hand open and palm facing up. Now, keeping my elbow in place, I'm going to close my hand into a fist and use my forearm to move my fist around in a circle, vertically, in a clockwise direction (like this...).

Those of us of a certain age and experience will certainly recognize such a gesture as a request to roll down one's window, as well as an ashtray in car, and can conjure a mental image of Julie McCoy Cruise Director from the old TV show, *The Love Boat*.

IV.

Ask yourself, though, when was the last time you were actually *in* a car that had hand-crank windows? Years? Decades? And, yet, the simple experience of rolling a window up and down, no matter how far we are removed from it now, remains not just a vivid memory that "belongs" to us and something which we forever carry with us as a kind of possession but, moreover, these are the very things which help to constitute or form us into the people we are today, as individuals, to some greater or lesser extent. The story I shared with the kids this morning, about penny-candy and pretzel rods is another example.

Further, when we hold such shared experiences in common, they bind us, one to another, into a community which is unique but need not necessarily be insular. These shared experiences form a kind of common ground which serves as jump-off point for humor, future endeavor and the opportunity to gain further knowledge, lore and wisdom.

V.

Of course, obsolete ash trays, time-worn TV characters and ancient technologies such as hand-crank windows occupy only minor roles in what becomes the story of who we are. Much more significant is the main cast of characters who inhabit our past and who have left their indelible and lasting mark on us.

Today, after worship, we will pause to remember and celebrate such a person, Lorna Webb. Lorna, and her husband Bill, labored tirelessly for decades, but always with glad spirits and joyful hearts, to keep moving our church forward into the future that you and I *now* enjoy. Bill and Lorna served as Elders and Deacons, helped with *countless* congregational functions and occupied almost every role in our church including, and especially, that of Treasurer. With pencil and ledger, they kept our bills paid and ledger balanced for over 30 years. Which is how I really got to know the Webbs.

VI.

Before I get into that, however, you need to know that Bill was a member of the Pastoral Nominating Committee (PNC) that brought me to this church 25 years ago. Though unofficial and never named as such, make no mistake about it, Bill occupied the role of “Gate Keeper” on the PNC. Regardless of the church, there is always one such person elected to serve as a “failsafe” against hiring the next pastor who is too outside the box with respect to the congregation and its history. In this regard, then, it can be said that Bill failed *miserably* at his appointed task (sorry, Bill, no point in mincing words now).

While the pony-tailed, brash, young pastor may not have been Bill’s *first* choice, I believe I am speaking the truth when I say the moment was right for this church to take a daring step to “get back into the game” (as Barry said at one point when I interviewed). Also, I think I was pretty much their *only* choice; though, that in no way it diminished the risk which *everyone* assumed; as, if I am remembering correctly, the vote to call me was unanimous.

VII.

It was in this context, then, I began my relationship with the Webbs. Lorna, in particular, would watch me like a *hawk*; as if *someone* (i.e., Bill/the PNC) had let the fox into the hen house. Particularly with every penny I asked to spend, each controversial action I took (particularly with regard to Lorna’s beloved Church and Community Program), and with all the comparatively radical ideas I pitched and with which we proceeded.

Which is only fair, and probably the exact same thing I would have done if I were in her shoes. Lorna, and Bill, and every member of the congregation had

an *awful* lot riding on “the new guy” and I don’t think it is in any way a stretch to say I was a *very* long shot, indeed. Sometimes, though, long shots pay off. Though it required a few years (*many* years, actually) a respect arose, then a fondness and, finally, a tender love. Not only did Lorna and Bill help to make our *church* what it is today, they helped me to become the *pastor* I am; and for each of these I am profoundly grateful.

VIII.

Today, as a church, we remember and celebrate Lorna and, in dedicating the new lounge in her name, acknowledge the important role she played in the life of our congregation. That said, in having known Lorna like I did, I can tell you she would not have abided *any* of this; not for *one* single moment. To which my finely worded, pastoral response to her would have been: “Tough!”

However, I would have also said that in dedicating the room in her name we honor not merely one woman, but ALL the women of our church who make this place go: those women who have done so *throughout* our church’s history and, of course, those women who do so *now*. That they should have a comfortable, cozy and welcoming space to do their thing (whatever they wish that thing to be) is something they deserve and, frankly, something they’ve earned and is *long* over-due.

IX.

However, amid everything happening today, the celebration of Lorna’s life, the creation and dedication of the lounge, and the care we offer to Bill and his family, the *real* kicker this morning is how the current congregation is moving *that* past into *this* future. As Pat and Ellen will surely tell you, feeding 80 to 100 people is no small feat. What is so inspiring is to see people who never even knew Lorna step up to help in both the labor and in the rejoicing.

While we may look to the past for humor, wisdom and inspiration, and variously claim it as our own, life is solely and only ever lived in the *now*. We best honor the past, and those who abide there, not by dwelling in it but by embracing the current moment our shared past helped to provide to us. The *past* helps us to discover and understand who we are and that we are *for* each other.

X.

However, we must also live out our present with an understanding of *to* whom we belong. Today's scripture reading from chapter one of the Apostle Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth finds Paul, once again, managing controversy. It seems the congregation was dividing itself and quarreling amongst themselves based on who first brought them into the church; be it Paul, Apollos or Cephas. This is not a new phenomenon, as such a thing happens *all* the time in churches; especially with regard to those occupying leadership roles.

Thankfully, though, such divisions and quarreling did *not* occur here on the park when, after a 27 year pastorate, Rev. Dick Stone retired and this "Rev. Mike" guy was called to fill his very familiar and well-worn shoes. Yes, there turned out to be a few sticks-in-the-mud and one or two Chicken Littles but, by and large, the congregation knew that who they needed to be for was each other; and that each of them, together as this church, belonged to God.

XI.

Which is easier said than done because, and let us not kid ourselves, there were some rough patches, particularly in my first few years (right now Pastor Donna is on the live stream with Wanda and Shirely there at PK, and she's nodding her head in agreement). That we all survived those experiences and were able to transition from one pastor to the next (and make no mistake about it many churches do *not* succeed in doing so) is owed solely to those in the congregation who got the theology right in understanding that they, as a church, were for *each other* and they had the faith to persevere in their belief that this church, *their* church, first and foremost belongs to *God in Christ*.

Chief among them was Lorna and Bill Webb, but *especially* Lorna. I know my rough and tumble ways caused Lorna no small amount of heart-ache because, as it is often said, change is *hard*. It is *much* easier to hold on to the past rather than live in the *now*, which is unpredictable and, therefore, scary. Though there was not a *lot* of slack in the chain, as it turns out there was enough.

XII.

I tell you all this here this morning as my way of remembering and celebrating the life, love and labors of Lorna Webb. However, there is a larger purpose, as I am sure you all suspect, because a great number of you listening to and reading this sermon will, at some point, find *yourselves* in Lorna's shoes as you transition from one pastor to the next. When that day comes, and it most certainly will, you will need to remember that who you are for is *each other*; not the former pastor and not what this church might have been at some point in the past however much it may have helped to constitute and form who you are as an individual and as a community of faith.

XIII.

Most importantly, though, we all need to remember that this church here on the Park, *our* church, belongs to *God*. "For the word about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing (on the road to perdition) but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." The power of God to allow the past to form and shape us but not define us. The power of God to unite us rather than divide us. The power of God to change ourselves and our world regardless of how hard such change might be to enact. The power of God to create and hold in common those shared experiences which bind us, one to another, and to use them to build a community of faith, fidelity and fondness which, while *certainly* unique, need not be insular. And, the power of God to live our lives in the *now*; this day, this generation, these children.

(Patting my chest over my heart and pointing to the congregation)

For *this* is who we are for...

(Both palms up and arms lifted in praise)

...and to God in Christ *all* of us belong. Amen.