SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Rev. Christopher A. Henry
Senior Pastor

CHURCH AT THE CROSSROADS

Be One

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

September 15, 2024

Nine miles south of where you now sit, on the northwest quadrant of Monument Circle at the heart of the City of Indianapolis, there is a bronze plaque that reads, "On this site stood The Second Presbyterian Church, organized 1838, Henry Ward Beecher, first pastor." Now, if you didn't know where it was or that it was there at all, you are not likely to find that bronze plaque. And yet, that plaque says something about *you*, gathered here on the same street in the same city nearly two centuries later. In 1840, when this fledging congregation and its 27-year-old pastor moved into its first building, our city of 2,700 residents was less than two decades old. A work in progress. And since the earliest days, you (we) have been part of that progress. Second Presbyterian Church is, as it ever has been, a church *for* the city of Indianapolis.

Fast forward. In 1988, under the leadership of another of Second's former pastors, Mayor Bill Hudnut, the city of 750,000 residents adopted as its official slogan: "Crossroads of America." The phrase reflected high—and to many, unrealistic—ambition. It referred not only to the junction of four interstate highways, but also to the growth and spirit of optimism that marked the moment. A crossroads. A convening. A meeting place. A hub of activity.

Or, a crossroads: the point at which a crucial decision, with far-reaching consequences, must be made. The tricky truth about that kind of crossroads is that we recognize it only in retrospect. Looking back, we can mark the impact—for good or ill—of a choice made at a critical moment. But it is difficult to see it in real time.

When the Apostle Paul wrote letters to congregations across the Greco-Roman world, he knew that the Christian movement was at a kind of crossroads. The course set by these early churches would indeed have far-reaching consequences. Now, Paul could not have imagined the scale, that we would be reading his mail these millennia later, but he did grasp the weight of the moment. His letters convey a deep sense of urgency and importance. He writes to churches at crossroads both geographic and spiritual.

I am convinced that we too stand at a crossroads. One of the gifts of this congregation that drew me to you six years ago is our role at the intersection of discipleship and citizenship. A church for the city. The crossroads of personal faith and public discourse. In our very first conversation, another legendary Second Church pastor, Bill Enright, told me that Second's superpower is the capacity to convene. A crossroads. In our time, this capacity is both consequential and deeply challenging. The choice we make now will reverberate into an unknown future. We are a people at the crossroads.

And so, I suggest it is a good time to turn to Paul's letters. For four Sundays, we're contemplating correspondence conveyed to a congregation at a crucial crossroads, and I suspect we'll see ourselves reflected in these ancient words.

So, off to Corinth we go. Not many years before writing the words we just heard, Paul arrived in the city with a message and a passion for sharing it. There, he preached the gospel, baptized a few families (he doesn't seem to recall exactly how many families), launched a community of Christ followers among urbane Gentiles. It was a sign for Paul of the power and movement of God that these former pagans heard and believed the gospel, that they were transformed and then united into the one body of Christ, people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives joined by one common creed: Jesus Christ is Lord.

But then Paul went away, and Apollos, an eloquent Alexandrian orator, was called to be pastor of First Church Corinth. Paul had not been gone long when he heard from his dear friend Chloe, a leader of the Corinthian church. Her report was, for Paul, devastating. The church, still not fully formed, had fallen into fractured factions. Instead of gathering for worship and meals as one community, affinity groups had formed. The Corinthians had devolved into personality-driven discipleship. I belong to Paul; I belong to Peter; I belong to Apollos.

Paul, frustrated and anxious for the church's future, drafts a letter. He moves quickly past the customary pleasantries, and in verse ten of chapter one, he gets straight to the point. "I appeal to you. I implore you. I ask of you. I command you. For the sake of Jesus Christ, be in agreement." Paul's words are so crystal clear because he knows that division in the community of faith directly undermines our central mission. Whether the city is Corinth or Indianapolis, we cannot be a church ***for*** the city when we are ***against*** each other.

Paul urges the Corinthians to be united, but I want to be clear. The unity Paul describes is not synonymous with uniformity. From the outset, faithful Christian communities have had no interest in drumming out difference or insisting on lockstep like-mindedness. And so, we decry the demonization of those deemed "other" that disregards the divine image in all of us and threatens the lives of neighbors. We celebrate the beautiful breadth of the family of faith. In fact, we aim to be the kind of place where people can argue intensely about sports rivalries, political convictions, even Biblical interpretation, and *then* enter this sacred space and sit beside the very person with whom you disagree and sing the hymns and pray the prayers and pass the peace of Jesus Christ.

He is our peace. And our unity.

In the gospel of John, Jesus prays for his disciples. He prays for protection. He prays for sanctification. But above all, he prays for unity. Jesus prays that his followers will be one, a prayer so central that he repeats it four times in these few verses. That they may all be one. You cannot read the prayer of Jesus and not conclude that the unity of the church mattered to him. I find it both instructive and challenging that Jesus did not pray for us to be right, or happy, or prosperous, or perfect. He prayed for unity.

Friends, we are most faithful and most fulfilled when we are one. The church is not—must not be—a special interest group, a political party, an exclusive club for those who fit in or a weekly meeting of the likeminded. Now, I don't want to be naïve about this. At a crossroads moment, it is hard work—*hard work*—to silence the siren song of self-righteous superiority. It is tempting to join the Corinthians. *I belong to Christ. I belong to Christ, but I'm not so sure about you*. You see, the call to unity demands humility.

One more thing. I read again this week about the epidemic of loneliness that is so widespread among us. Our carved-up tribalism inevitably exacerbates this isolation. One statistic stood out: a Gallup survey of weekly attendance at religious services. That number—weekly attendance—fell to 21% of the U.S. population last year. Richard Weissbourd, Director of the Making Caring Common Project at Harvard, had some interesting thoughts on the topic in March at the Kennedy School of Government. Weissbourd said, "I'm not suggesting that we should become more religious, but I [do] want to suggest…that religious communities are a place where adults engage kids, stand for moral values, welcome big moral questions, [a place] where there is a fusion of a moral life and a spiritual life…the sense that you have obligations to your ancestors and your descendants, where there is a structure for dealing with grief and loss." Later in the lecture, Weissbourd continued, sounding a bit like a preacher, "I feel urgently that we have to figure out how to reproduce those aspects of religion in secular life."

Well, with all due respect to the professor, I'd like to suggest that there is something unique in the formation of faith communities that will be difficult to

reproduce in secular life. We pursue the values and virtues he celebrates not for their practicality but because God created us for community. Our sense that we have obligations to our ancestors and our descendants, our insistence on engaging big moral questions, come from our conviction that God calls us to care for one another. And so, our unity is rooted in something deeper than expedience.

Paul preached unity with roots beyond allegiance to shared identity, partisan perspective, or human leader. We belong to each other *because* we belong to God. And so, perhaps the question is as simple as this: what kind of community are we called to be? Which values and convictions will guide us at this crossroads?

Of course, I acknowledge that the answers are more complex than the questions. Our courage and our commitment will be tested. In my experience, staying together is more difficult than breaking apart. Maintaining unity requires the hard work of compassion, even love, for people whose positions disappoint, sadden, even anger you. I think Jesus prayed so fervently for the oneness of the church because he knew how difficult it would be for us, how often we succumb to forces of division.

But I ask you this. Has the strength of the Christian witness, or the depth of your own faith, been increased by movements that aim for perceived purity by exclusion and subtraction? I for one am not moved by any definition of community that excludes those unlike me. More importantly, I do not believe the life of Jesus Christ sanctions that model.

No, we are called to a unity born not of sameness but of oneness. A community that values being together more than being rigidly righteous. A crossroads. A meeting place. A hub of activity. A crossroads. The point at which a crucial decision must be made.

The city we serve needs our witness. The world is watching. Jesus prayed that his followers would be one. Our unity is the best proof that we got the point. Amen.