

In the last few weeks, the American House of Representatives satiated a 'news junkies' desire for drama. For 4 days and through 15 votes the Republican party in the United States sought to confirm a leader – officially a 'speaker' - for the House of Representatives. This drama revealed a persistent flaw in the human creature, namely the hesitancy to sacrifice personal agendas in favour of higher ground. Shouts of celebration after the November elections turned to tears of frustration as this group of individuals attempted to work with one another. Despite claiming a common conservative agenda, they struggled to reconcile their internal divisions for the benefit of the country.

Of course, such divisiveness is not unique to the United States. We have but to look at the nation of Brazil where divided factions ransacked the houses of law and government arguing that their group alone had the right to govern. And, last week, a report from the Eurasia (Think Tank) declared that, "Canada is showing signs of the same political contagion and polarization that has afflicted American politics." Last year's freedom convoy and ongoing federal/provincial squabbles are testimony to this conclusion.

Sometimes we have to look no further than our own families and friends to recognize the divisions that plague human community. There are

those who champion climate action and those who advocate for unrestrained resource development; those who support the efficacy of vaccines and those who reject them; those who think the city should build a downtown arena and those who think the money should go to social housing.

Even our religious communities are not immune to divisive attitudes. When my childhood friend took me to her Roman Catholic Church my mother's protestant antenna quivered with anxiety. When a different friend took me to his apostolic church Mom was filled with outright fear. Although we seemed to have moved beyond the hard lines of Protestant and Catholic division there are those who now look with suspicion upon the worship practices of Sikhs, Muslims and New Age Spiritualists.

I began thinking about all these divisions after reading this morning's scripture passage. In the opening paragraphs of Paul's letter to the Corinthian church we discover divisions, alliances, and disputes that plagued the earliest of Christian communities. Paul alerts us to how certain factions are arguing for status. He writes:

... it has been reported to me ... that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas.'

It appears that within these early Christian communities, leaders have arisen who have developed a loyal following and their devotees are claiming the primacy of their point of view. All of this causes Paul, in exasperation to ask: “Has Christ been divided? Was it Paul (or Apollos or Cephas) who was crucified?” Paul suggests that the Christian community has lost its way amidst personality contests and debates about allegiance. He argues that such divisions lose sight of the primary goal of living a life modeled on Jesus. It appears that they have sacrificed Jesus’ example of radical love in favour of personality cults. It is so easy to get caught up in cults - personality cults: for Biden or Trump, Trudeau or Poilievre. Ideological cults for capitalism or socialism, individualism or communitarianism. Denominational cults: for progressive Christianity or born-again evangelism. Paul’s lament echoes through the centuries – ‘how have we become so divided?’

St. Paul was converted to a life beyond such divisions. You will remember that Paul was a Jew, possibly a Pharisee, who was absolutely committed to his religious tradition and its precepts. As the followers of Jesus grew in number and enthusiasm, Paul made it his personal mission to find Jesus’ followers, prosecute them and punish them. Then, one day, the Risen Christ came to Paul in a blinding light which totally changed him. In that moment he was converted to the way of radical love, the essence of

Christ' message. He writes, "faith, hope and love remain, and the greatest of these is love." Love, not persecution; unity, not division; building up, not tearing down, now became the focus of Paul's life.

Perhaps that is why he is so distressed over the divisions in the early Christian community. Perhaps he had seen the worst of what intractable division can do and he longs for the community to move beyond factionalism and to be united with 'the same mind and the same purpose.' And to this end he holds up the cross of Christ. He writes, "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

Paul holds up the cross as the rallying point, the crucifixion as the example of a life which has risen to its higher purpose. He acknowledges it seems foolish. Death on a cross is not much of a rallying point yet he understands that Jesus held on to the higher vision of love despite Peter's encouragement to hide, despite Judas desire for rebellion, despite the mockery of Pilate and the seeming indifference of the crowd. Jesus' life was always shaped by love whether he was encountering the rich young ruler or a bruised traveller; whether he was eating with a tax collector or a woman of foreign origins. He could have become immersed in debates about wealth

and poverty, crime and punishment, the merits of taxation, the wisdom of consorting with foreigners, but he doesn't. Jesus' first act is always to love – even when such radical loving brought him into conflict with the prevailing powers. Those who seek to oppress others always benefit when they can sow divisions. Paul holds up Jesus radical commitment to love as the unifying force that can 'save' humanity. We are called to make 'love' our primary goal in every discussion or debate – not the cult of personality, not personal gain, not a particular ideology – but love of neighbour, growing out of a love of self that rises above division to unity in God and God's purpose for the world.

Amazingly we can see this love, this unity of purpose, amidst some of the most divisive places in the world. Let us think again of the people of South Africa during the era of apartheid. As the old regime began to crumble and the power of black South Africans began to emerge it must have been so tempting to simply flip the table on the one-time oppressors. Led by the long-imprisoned Nelson Mandela, black South Africans made reconciliation, not revenge, the higher goal for their country. We see a similar pursuit of a higher goal among Canada's Indigenous peoples. Despite years of oppression and the great grief arising from unmarked graves, Indigenous peoples are pursuing the higher goal of reconciliation beyond their

immediate grief. In a CBC new articles Chief Candus Delorme of Cowess First Nation told of the unity he felt when the Prime Minister and the Premier joined him at the site of unmarked graves. He stated: “The laughter, the Indigenous humour, the Indigenous dance, the Indigenous drum, the pride of Cowessess and to have two leaders in this country come and sit with us and sign an agreement, asserting that Cowessess has full control over the destiny of our children and families ... It was a day to remember for this First Nation. Then we went down to the gravesite and I have a beautiful picture ... of prime minister, premier and I walking in the gravesite... just the three of us walking shoulder to shoulder in the area of unmarked graves. It is a picture I cherish, because it reminds me as a chief that Cowessess is not in this alone.”

As I read this story I felt my emotions arise as I saw the essence of Jesus message played out upon this land – out of death there arises a higher purpose, a call to love above all else. Of course love is not just an emotion – it is an engagement, a relationship, justice, courage and commitment.

This Sunday falls in the middle of what has long been called The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Since 1894 churches around the world have dedicated this week to pursuing what they have in common. Painfully aware that the divisions St. Paul observed in his community only grew

deeper over the centuries there arose a commitment to seeking a higher purpose. Meaningful dialogue between congregations, such as the covenant made between McClure Church and Holy Spirit Roman Catholic Church has resulted in much goodwill. When I went to the web page of the World Council of Churches I saw the themes set out for each day of this week for unity. Here, too, a higher purpose could be seen for the topics were not about wine verses grape juice, infant baptism versus believers baptism or any of the host of things that have kept Christians divided. The Christian community was called to a higher purpose under topics such as, “when justice is done; walking humbly; considering the tears of the oppressed; strangers in a foreign land; considering the least among us.” Surely these are the causes that should call all Christians into a unified response.

Last Sunday I saw a little spark of unity arising from the ashes of the little church in Wakaw Saskatchewan. I’ve told you before of how the little congregation of a dozen are planning to sell their building. For years, on the other side of main street, there has existed the ‘other’ protestant church in the community. At one time affiliated with the Baptists it has more recently been named simply the ‘Community Church’ and I’m told it is served by from some Salvation Army folks from Prince Albert. At our

church meeting last Sunday, while tending to the details of the sale, someone ventured the idea that maybe we could hold services in the community church, maybe we could even join with the community church. Someone volunteered to initiate a discussion and amidst the death throes of our little congregation the higher purpose of worshipping God opened up the possibility of unity.

I have minimal influence at Wakaw and no influence on the World Council of Church, the Canadian government or any other of the world's trouble spots. What I do have influence over is how I interact with others – on whether I promote division, tenaciously hold on to my point of view or seek a higher purpose. This is not a simple task for I'm committed to my views about politics, pipelines and poverty. As one commentator pointed out St. Paul was not wanting to do away with differences, but with divisions. So, how can I hold on to my viewpoints when encountering someone who sees the world differently than me. How might I invite discussions to imagine a higher purpose, a common good? I have recently come across a series of questions that might help me enter discussions with a view to a higher good. I can ask myself:

1. In this discussion, would I rather be right or would I rather understand the other person?



2. How did I come to hold my perspective and why is this important to me?
3. What is it that I ultimately want to be true beyond this discussion?

For example, I believe that carbon is a threat to the future of the planet which I want preserved for my grandchildren. My friend works in the oil industry and wants to keep his job so that his family can have a good and secure life. Perhaps the common point is our love for our families. Is this a starting point to a conversation beyond divisions?

The path through division is never easy but let us heed St. Paul's plea that we be united in the same mind as we pursue the ultimate purpose of love. May God be our guide. Amen.