

Epiphany 3 (2017) 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Many new cars have sensors in the tires that will let a driver know that a tire is flat or even under-inflated. I could have used that feature a few years ago on one day when I driving from home into the Church office at Wisconsin Dells. It had snowed during the night, so the roads were covered and I was driving slower than usual. The car was acting funny, but I didn't think anything unusual, I expected the roads to be slippery, but when I got to the office, I realized that one of the tires my flat. Thankfully, it was only flat on one side.

On that occasion, I didn't have any real problems, but flat tires can be a serious issue. Many new cars these days don't have spares -- in part to save money, but especially to reduce vehicle weight to help meet increasingly tightened federal mileage standards. So, instead of a spare, a new car is likely to have either a tire repair kit with sealant and plug-in compressor to re-inflate tires or the even better option: run-flat tires.

These are specially constructed so that, after a puncture and loss of air, they can still perform well enough that drivers can keep going and get to a tire repair shop. That can be especially helpful if the puncture occurs in an inconvenient or dangerous location, or if the driver is unable to put on a spare roadside. Run-flat tires, then, are a boon for drivers, but at best, they're a temporary solution. Most can only be used for about 50 miles and then, only at less than 50 miles per hour.

One of the problems with run-flat tires is that sometimes you don't know the tire has gone flat. Unless your car has a sensor that warns you, you can keep driving and get into real trouble. In today's epistle reading, we discover that the Corinthian church has a serious tire problem. What was true then can be true today as well.

Considering the restrictions, a run-flat tire is a pretty good metaphor for a congregation suffering internal conflict. It may keep rolling *for a while, but its*

range is limited and without a fix, it will eventually give out. In the church, we often ignore the warning signs that we're running flat, or the people in the pews aren't even aware of them. Then when the crisis hits, it's worse than it could have been.

What happens when you drive too far on a flat tire, or exceed the limits of a run-flat tire? *Total destruction!* While few people these days have actually experienced a blow-out, everyone has seen chunks of tire strewn on the highway. A divided church that tries to "run flat" for too long will eventually be truly divided -- shredded, with despairing and damaged folks left by the side of the road.

A flat tire can be fixed.

A shredded tire, or a shredded church, is unfixable.

Once people come apart, they often will never want to be part of a church again.

Many, if not most, approaches to addressing problems begin with identifying the problem and focusing on fixing what is broken. Paul did not use that approach in our Bible reading today, despite the reality the problems there were serious, indeed. Instead, as I talked about last week, Paul began by identifying the sources of giftedness and strength the community possessed thanks to the gracious and abundant provision of God.

Then, and only then, did he get to the core challenge this community was facing. "I appeal to you" he says. You have these gifts, these sources of strength, given by God. Every person has been gifted by God in a special way with unique gifts. Now use them to God's glory, and trust in the strength already given you to address these vexing and serious problems that threaten your witness, your mission, and even your continued existence as a community in Jesus Christ.

What makes for unity? Is it the entire absence of all conflict? Hardly! Conflict over legitimate reasons can be healthy and a sign of health. We

cannot grow and we cannot engage in God's mission without both encountering and to some degree stimulating conflict. What makes for unity isn't the absence of conflict.

The problem wasn't conflict per se. It was factions. End factions, Paul told them. Be done with such things. Rejoice in your diversity, but play on the same team, "united in thought and purpose" (v. 10), and being informed by the same wisdom, the wisdom of the cross (v. 18).

Christ offers us a unity of spirit that is crucial to our well-being. We have a tendency, he reminds us, to get wrapped up in "who baptized us" or what "church we belong to" or what we think is the best way to proceed on one issue or another and we lose that oneness that gives us our strength and our power.

You may have heard the story about the little fish who was flopping around on the beach, gasping and miserable. Someone came by and set the little fish up in a nice yard chair, but the little fish was still miserable. Someone else came along and added a lovely beach umbrella, but still the little fish suffered. Cold lemonade was brought, and he even received a beautiful, new swimming suit, but nothing made him happy. What he really needed was "Play-fish Magazine," so they brought that to him, along with lots of money, but he was still miserable.

All in the world the little fish needed was to be put back into the water where he belonged. It's easy to lose touch with our deepest needs when we get caught up in the divisions of the world, but oneness with Christ is our "water of survival," and without it, nothing can bring us lasting peace. The cross of Christ gets us back to the water and gives us power to live in unity with Him and each other.

Paul's words invite us not to hash out a Church's own debates or to search for the next superstar preacher, youth director or worship leader or musician to save the church, but to understand our life in light of the power and the revelation of the cross.

Ultimately our Bible passage today is a wonderful opportunity to help us reprioritize our energy and concern within our worship life.

The center of a congregation's life and worship isn't rooted in the things we often fight over, be it worship style, well-manicured buildings, or the latest culture war dustup.

No, the center of power and transformation in the Christian life can be found where it's always been: at the cross.

Paul writes that the message of the cross is the power of God.

Our fellowship, our existence and our purpose as a Church, can't be in budgets or building projects or the type of music we prefer, but have to be focused on who we are in Christ and what is God's plan and desire for us as a Church.

You may remember a few years back when WWJD, "What Would Jesus Do," was the newest Christian catch phrase. Maybe you even have a WWJD leather bracelet stuck in the back of a drawer. It was a little bit gimmicky, but the sentiment is still true.

What would Jesus do in every decision we make in the Church? What would Jesus have us do as we make decisions for the life and future of the Church? Our fellowship, as the body of Christ, is in Christ himself and we must be guided by the commitment to show Christ in everything we do.