

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.” Isaiah says these words, using the image of light, to describe Israel’s joy after their liberation from oppression. For us today they represent both the hope and promise delivered to humankind in the birth of a infant sent to bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth. And today we’ve see him strolling along the beach asking fishermen to follow him. He makes evangelism look really easy!

An interesting note about today’s call story. Last week we heard from the Gospel of John that John the Baptist’s own disciples were standing with him when Jesus walked by. When John called him the Lamb of God, they left John to follow Jesus. According to the Gospel one of them was Andrew, who recognized Jesus as the Messiah, then went to find his brother Simon Peter and take him to Jesus. But Matthew puts Andrew on the beach, although still with his brother Simon Peter. These differences remind us that each of the Gospels were written with a different perspective and a different focus to a different audience. Are they important? Perhaps to some. In my mind, what is important is not where Peter first encountered Jesus, but that he said yes, *immediately* leaving his nets to follow Jesus without really knowing anything about this man.

We can’t afford to get bogged down in the differences in scriptural accounts. Instead we must allow the Holy Spirit to show us what we’re to *learn* when we study a passage. Sadly, though, there are many disagreements over what the Bible says and means in numerous passages. Some are so serious they result in permanent division within the one holy, catholic church, formed by the Holy Spirit to bring followers of Christ together to worship, live together in community, and to follow the teachings of Christ.

Yet throughout the lifetime of the church, there have been disagreements and divisions so deep they could not be repaired. One example is The Churches of Christ, autonomous Christian congregations connected to each through common beliefs and practices. Perhaps the most important of their beliefs is that doctrine and practice must be based on the Bible alone, literally supported by scripture, for them to be *the* church of the New Testament—hence the name: Churches of Christ. But in 1906 the Churches of Christ split in two. They disagreed on numerous things, but the biggest was their disagreement about whether the Bible says it’s okay to use musical instruments in worship. Many breakaway denominations were formed by similar disputes.

As unique, imperfect human beings, we’ve always been divided by our differences, and obviously we’re still divided today, sometimes over significant matters and sometimes over details that really don’t matter in the long run but are important to us. My friend Matt, an Episcopal priest in Texas, tells that his mother was very particular about how things were kept in the bathrooms of their home. She taught him that toilet paper should be hung so that it falls close to the wall. If he hung it wrong, she would make him go back and change it. He was shocked to learn that in his best friend’s home the toilet paper was hung incorrectly, falling over the roll, and engaged the boy in a deep and serious conversation to persuade him to correct the error in his home. Another time he went to a sleepover and encountered the same mistake. He went into each of the bathrooms and rehung the paper the right way. When he told his mother what he had done, she realized she had taught him strict bias rather than tolerance and corrected her teaching by reminding him that “any way you roll it, toilet paper serves the same purpose.” Matt swears this is a true story.

In Paul’s Letter to the church at Corinth, he’s writing about something far more serious: baptism—not the baptism itself, but the loyalty displayed to the person who had baptized them, and their assertion that one was better, even more effective than the other. Consequently, their allegiance was not with the church, or even with Christ, but with the one who baptized them. Totally missing the point of baptism and its intention to *unite* the baptized in the Body of Christ, those folks split their church into factions over it. It was important to them, important enough to argue about and

to take sides over. But Paul, who is obviously dismayed about the dispute, lets them know without question how wrong they are.

This story reminds me of things I often heard after I came here in 2011, and sometimes hear still today: stories about what Dee de Montmollin did, or Blake Rambo did, or Bill Murphy did, or Ron Haines did. I'm pretty sure each of them heard similar stories about the priests who preceded them; and certainly whoever follows me will hear about me, both the good and the bad. What's missing are our stories about what *Christ* has done at St. Francis—with us, to us, and for us. We put too much emphasis on our clergy, I believe. This is not our church or the church of any human being. It came to be because of the death and resurrection of our Savior, not because of anything we've done. And although it's our nature to focus on the human beings who influence us with their teachings and who have either touched our hearts or made us mad, it is to Christ we give glory. The church at Corinth didn't belong to Paul or Apollos or Cephas; it belonged to Christ. St. Francis doesn't belong to me or Dee or Blake or Bill or Ron or any of those who went before us, even the founders. It belongs to Christ, and we should call ourselves back to remember that when we temporarily forget it.

I remember the days when Christians were Christians, followers of Christ first and foremost. Sure, there were denominational differences, but for the most part those seemed simple, sometimes even petty, certainly not enough to divide people. Nowadays we use labels like progressive or fundamentalist or evangelical as *part* of the name Christians. Sometimes it isn't even clear what those things mean unless we put them in a political context. But the labels separate us. Somewhere along the line we've begun to use the Bible and its teachings, and even Jesus Christ himself, as a way to promote our own agendas. And *that* takes us so far off base that for some people, the name Christian implies someone so different from those first followers that we barely recognize the connection. A dear friend calls herself "a follower of Christ" because "Christian" so often brings up negative reactions. What happened to our pure and simple faith, our promises to love God above anyone else, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to treat all of God's children with respect and dignity, and to care for those persons who throughout time have been pushed to the margins of society? We don't need to answer that question—we can see the answer all around us. If Paul feared that disputes in the early church would grow more serious and divisions more permanent, he was right. Then and now the Body of Christ must be unified so that when people come to us looking for Christ they are certain to find him.

In an article entitled "Why Millennials are Leaving the Church," Rachel Held Evans, a Christian author born in 1981, now 35 years old, wrote: "What millennials really want from the church is not a change in style but a change in substance. We want an end to the culture wars. We want a truce between science and faith. We want to be known for what we stand for, not what we are against. ... We're not leaving the church because we don't find the cool factor there; we're leaving the church because we don't find Jesus there. Like every generation before ours and every generation after, deep down, we long for Jesus."

So do I, Rachel. So do I. I think you all do, too. We forget that Christ, the light of the world, is right here with us, waiting to be invited to return to our hearts and to our churches, to shine on us all, and to once again become the Lord of our lives. We cannot wait until we see what's going to happen in our nation or in the world. We cannot wait for someone else to volunteer to help or even to take the lead. *We must act now.* This is urgent! People are walking in darkness, looking for light. Together, unified as *one body*, the Body of Christ, we can lead them to it.

Please turn to page 818 in the Book of Common Prayer, and join me in Prayer for the Unity of the Church, number 18.

O God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, the Prince of Peace: Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions; take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatever else may hinder us from godly union and concord; that, as there is but one Body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so we may be all of one heart and of one sould, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*