

1 Sermon, September 18, 2011

Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, Matthew 18:18-22, Isaiah 54:9-17

Title: "Finding Christ at the Center: Seeing All Sides"

When I was young, my parents instilled some very strong values in me:

1. Try to see the other side
2. Don't call unnecessary attention to yourself – that's vanity
3. Don't think you're superior to others
4. Don't complain unless you really have to
5. Try to work within the system

These values were never listed out like this, but I learned them nonetheless.

I learned to try to see the other side because whenever I came home with a problem with someone else, my Mom tried to get me to think about how they saw things, or to sympathize with problems they might have. She'd say, "Now, Jim, think about how they must feel..."

I learned not to call attention to myself because my parents never bragged, and never tried to show off.

I learned not to think I was superior to others because that was a message drilled into me from my parents. My parents let me know that just because I got better grades than some other people, that didn't make me better than them. Just because I was going to go to college didn't mean that non-college jobs were any less important. Jesus was a carpenter; he didn't go to college.

I learned not to complain, because when we were in a restaurant, even when my mother didn't like something, she never complained, but just made do, maybe not eating it.

I learned to work within the system because my parents believed that you could work within the system. They voted, and trusted that this was one of the best ways to change things. They believe that some things ought to be changed, but they have never been activists.

Over time, I learned that not everyone was raised the way I was.

Some parents taught their children to call attention to themselves. They'd say, get noticed; that's how you get ahead.

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Other parents taught their children about the value of money, and how to make a profit. They taught their children to look at the world in terms of opportunities. The children learned to out-think other people, always be a step ahead, anticipate the actions of others.

Some parents taught complaining. They didn't *try* to teach complaining, but they did just by virtue of complaining all the time. So the children grew up with the attitude that the world owed them something; the world should be better than it is.

Some parents taught their children that they were to find the thing they were great at, and really excel. They might be smarter, or quicker, or stronger, or have more stamina. They might be great athletes, great musicians, great actors, but there was some way in which they were better than others. They should take advantage of it.

Even as an adult, I am sometimes surprised by people's values that are so different from mine. And here I am, leading a church, filled with people who have very different values from each other, and trying to get them to work together, and be at peace. In fact, I'm trying to get them to be *peacemakers*. After all, I was raised to get along with people.

I marvel at Jesus, how he was able to hold together a group of disciples that was so diverse. Peter, Andrew, James and John were simple fishermen. Matthew was a wealthy tax collector. Nicodemus and Lazarus were some of the followers of Christ, one a powerful Pharisee, the other raised from the dead. There was Mary Magdalene, who early tradition calls a wealthy woman. Finally, there is Judas the sicarii – sicarii is Latin for a kind of knife by which some radicals cut the throats of any Roman soldiers they could.

Why did such a diverse group surround Jesus? How did he make it work? The Bible tells us they didn't always get along; that James and John wanted special places in Jesus' coming kingdom, and the other disciples were quite angry about that.

The Bible is a witness to the variety of opinion; in fact, you could say that Jesus was put to death for having a different opinion.

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At the same time, the Bible is witness to how God calls together into his Kingdom some very different characters, and calls them to work together.

Listen again to the reading from 1 Corinthians:

10My dear friends, as a follower of our Lord Jesus Christ, I beg you to get along with each other. Don't take sides. Always try to agree in what you think. **11**Several people from Chloe's family have already reported to me that you keep arguing with each other. **12**They have said that some of you claim to follow me, while others claim to follow Apollos or Peter or Christ. **13**Has Christ been divided up? Was I nailed to a cross for you? Were you baptized in my name?

Christ has not been divided up. Christ is the same, even though many different leaders tell about him in different ways. We know that Paul and Peter were very different, and we assume that this Apollos who Paul mentions was still different from them. Yet all three were teaching about the same Jesus.

The Bible has a strong freedom tradition, stemming from Moses' call to the Pharaoh to "Let my people go." Jesus himself talked about liberating the oppressed, and setting the captives free. You could say that part of the Bible is written from the perspective of the poor, asking for justice from the rich and powerful.

~~—Hear what the prophet Samuel tells the people when they ask for a king:~~

~~He said, "This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plough his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves." 1 Samuel 8:10-17, NIV.~~

The Bible has another tradition, which you find the book of Proverbs, and scattered throughout the scriptures, that takes a look at

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things from the perspective of the powerful, and asks: "How do we faithfully exercise power?"

Solomon asks for wisdom to rule his kingdom, and God grants it.

"The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God." Psalms 92:12, 13, NIV.

The word "righteous" refers to someone with power trying to use it well. Righteousness is about choosing to treat others well:

"If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered." Proverbs 21:13, NIV.

The Bible has something to say to labor and something to say to management. The book of Proverbs, especially, is sensitive to those who are in charge of a small plot of land, AND those who employ hundreds of people.

How does that speak to the protests at the capitol earlier this year? Well, it doesn't paint a black and white picture, with one side all right and the other all wrong.

Instead, the scriptures ask what is righteous: what is the best exercise of power that honors commitments, that shares in sacrifice, that builds relationships? If people rely on one another, how can those relationships be preserved?

The title of today's sermon is: "Finding Christ at the Center: Seeing All Sides."

Maybe that's a naïve title. None of us can completely see all sides. But it is in coming to the center that we can come closest to Jesus. This means that when we're able to leave aside the shrill rhetoric, and really listen to each other, we're more able to hear the voice of God.

It's not easy. We are so different from each other.

But it is in finding what is common that we find what runs deep down inside each of us, and those deep down yearnings, those deep down longings for love and justice were put there by God.

The hot-button issues of today are really all about deeply held values and yearnings.

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Abortion can be fuel for loud arguments, but that's because we're asking about what value life has, and when does it start, and is my body sacred and do I have control over it?

The debate over abortion is a debate where we should be able to honor each other's deeply held values.

Likewise, Gun control and Concealed carry are hot button issues because they relate to deeply held values, like: how do I preserve my freedom, and how do I keep my community safe, and what do I believe about violence?

I could list many more issues that divide us, and show how they are really about deeply held values. And if we were able to *really hear* the values of the other person, we'd say – "So that's what you mean! I don't agree with you, because my values are a little different. But I see why you think that way."

And that's what the apostle Paul meant by "agreeing with one another, and not taking sides. That's what is meant by the word unity when it's used in the New Testament.

There is truly power in this kind of coming together and understanding each other. I think that's why Jesus said,

Again I assure you that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there with them."

Amen.

1 Corinthians 1:10-13

Contemporary English Version (CEV)

10My dear friends, as a follower of our Lord Jesus Christ, I beg you to get along with each other. Don't take sides. Always try to agree in what you think. **11**Several people from Chloe's family [**a**] have already reported to me that you keep arguing with each other. **12**They have said that some of you claim to follow me, while others claim to follow Apollos or Peter [**b**] or Christ. **13**Has Christ been divided up? Was I nailed to a cross for you? Were you baptized in my name?

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1 Corinthians 1:10-13

New International Version (NIV)

10 I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,[**a**] in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. **11** My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. **12** What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas[**b**]"; still another, "I follow Christ."

13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?

Matthew 18:18-22

New International Version (NIV)

18 "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be[**a**] bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be[**b**] loosed in heaven.

19 "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. **20** For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.[**c**]"

Matthew 18:18-22

Common English Bible (CEB)

18 I assure you that whatever you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. And whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven. **19** Again I assure you that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. **20** For where two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there with them."

21 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?"

22 Jesus said, "Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times.[**a**]"