

WGUMC November 4, 2012 "Uncommon Good"
I Corinthians 1:26-31 and I Corinthians 12:1, 4-11

On Tuesday night I'll be in Colorado watching the election returns with my parents. I blame them for my addiction to presidential politics. I remember when my parents were the last people on the planet to buy a VCR, and Mom bought it to tape the presidential debates in 1992.

Twenty years later, I'm wanting to be done with this election. I want to wash my hands of this ugliest, meanest, most disgustingly-expensive campaign ever. Both candidates have spent over \$1 billion to get elected. Just think what we could have done with a couple billion dollars! Makes we want to cry, thinking about spending so much money on elections that tear people down instead of on the institutions that build people up.

You'll shake your head and tell me that there are deep divisions in this country, and I believe you. Americans are reeling from all the changes in our society, our economy, our

technology, our families. And don't forget natural disasters here at home and political disasters around the world. It's all so overwhelming! We don't know the way forward. We're not sure whom to follow. And because we're afraid, we start to fight with each other.

But that's nothing new. Go back to the early days of Christianity. There were deep divisions in the Corinthian Church, too. People were voting for their leaders. Some were saying, "I belong to Paul." And others, "I belong to Apollos." And still others, "I belong to Cephas (Peter)." [1 Cor 1:12] Makes the church in Corinth sound more like a party convention than a faith community.

So in his letter, Paul called them out. He said, "Has Christ been divided?" [1:13] Of course not! So, why were they taking sides? Who was Paul or Apollos or Cephas anyway? Weren't they all co-workers in Christ, servants of the Savior? [3:5]

Paul did not come to start a personality cult or run for president. He came to proclaim Christ crucified. [1:17] The problem is that the idea of a crucified Messiah was a non-starter for Jews and utter foolishness for Gentiles. Yet this Christ crucified is our Lord. This cross is God's idea of true leadership!

And that's precisely why Jesus could never get elected today, because he talked about serving and suffering and he talked about self-sacrifice. Can you imagine how that speech would go over? How long that campaign would last? But Paul tells us that God deliberately chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise and what is weak in the world to shame the strong. [1:27-28]

That's not how we do things, is it? We think we are choosing the wise and then get angry when they don't have all the answers. We choose the one who appears to be strong and then turn on them when we find their weakness. How long will

it take for us to learn that if we want a superhero, if we're looking for a savior, our human leaders will always disappoint us, but our Lord never will.

The one who emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming humble and obedient to the point of death [Phil 2:5-11], who was despised and rejected, a man of suffering, who bore our afflictions and was wounded for our transgressions [Isaiah 53], this Jesus is the power of God and the wisdom of God. Vote for him!

It's too bad that no politician has a prayer of ever measuring up to the Jesus standard of leadership. But the Jesus standard makes no sense in any world except the one called "the kingdom of God." God's kingdom truly is an alternative universe, and that, my friends, is where Jesus calls us to live. So our job for now is to keep building its prototype, the alpha version (the Church), and live there.

So, the letter of First Corinthians is really all about how to live in together in the Church with Jesus as our leader. Here we can learn how to get along despite our differences and divisions, and we can learn how to love one another. You've got to wonder whether our leaders have ever read this letter.

Take Chapter 12, the chapter about spiritual gifts. What a difference it would make in our world if we all looked for and acknowledged the gifts in other people. How much harder it is to find fault with someone if we can see what is God-given in them. In a former church, I had a parishioner and we couldn't have been farther apart politically. He would come early on Sundays, both barrels loaded, and let me have it right before worship began. But I couldn't help liking the man. Despite everything, he respected me as his pastor. He even bragged about me to strangers. And I thought, even if his gift is for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, he is still giving me an opportunity to grow in grace and to practice forgiveness!

Paul says that there is a wide variety of gifts, but they all come from the same Giver. And they are all given for the same purpose: not to build up my ego or to benefit only the people who are on my side or who belong to my party. God gives gifts individually, but they are to be used communally. Paul puts it this way: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

The common good. Now there's a notion that's pretty uncommon these days. All you seem to hear about is how you have to look out for yourself, do what's right for you. And be sure to do unto others before they have a chance to do unto you!

Back when I was in college, I would walk around Boston Common, a patch of community property near Beacon Hill where in Puritan days people used to pasture their livestock. Today, Boston Common is a public park. But where the cows used to graze, homeless people now sleep.

The human bodies in Boston Common and many other public places tell me that we don't put much stock in the common good anymore. We don't support public institutions like schools the way we used to. We question whether collective action can really solve problems, so we tend to let them go until they get so big they become unsolvable.

But without shared commitment to the common good, things are going to get uncommonly bad for us. Our divisions, whether they be in the House of God or the House of Representatives, are threatening to undo us.

Remember, Paul says, "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it." [12:27] Imagine that we are all cells in that corporate body. Now, if we go rogue, if we all wander around, doing our own cellular thing without regard to the effects on anyone else, then we are doing exactly what cancer cells do. And if someone doesn't put a stop to it, we'll kill the body.

So let's not be a cancer on the body! Whether in the Body of Christ or in the body that we call "society," we all have the same job: put aside our differences, dig down to find our commonalities, and then work together for the good of all. Oh, there will be a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit, and a variety of services, but the same Lord. So we can learn from a variety of perspectives and use a variety of strategies. Because no one can be 100% right and no one is 100% wrong. But we must be 100% in it for each other.

I'd rather vote for the common good than for either candidate in this election, but it isn't that easy. That wasn't an option when I filled out my ballot. And though I won't tell you for whom to vote, I will tell you in whom to trust.

Put your trust in Christ alone. Come Tuesday, some of you may feel like winners and some like losers. But, remember, here in the Body of Christ, the Church, in this alternative universe that we are trying to build, there are no losers. Next

Sunday, we'll all be winners, because God gives us the victory through our Lord and Leader Jesus Christ. [I Cor 15:57] Christ is risen. Alleluia!