

*Epiphany 3A*

Paul appeals to the fractious Corinthian Christians that they all “be in agreement and that there be no divisions among [them], but that [they] be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”

Jesus unites, but the world divides.

It is remarkable how many ways we have of dividing people, and even more remarkable how easy it is.

I mean, people create distinctions based on what chocolate we prefer.

Woe to the person who likes white chocolate!

People even judge others based on the mulch they use.

The Corinthians were dividing up based on who baptized them—Paul, Apollo, Cephas.

Paul had to remind them that we are one in Christ.

Division comes as a byproduct of the temptation to project (to use the psychological term), or scapegoat (to use the ethical term).

Rather than face our own imperfection, in other words, we choose to deflect attention (both our own and that of others) from ourselves by blaming and criticizing another person or group of people (those baptized by Cephas, those who wear hoodies, people who use pine straw).

This has the added benefit of making ourselves feel powerful.

The temptation to do this is therefore strong and universal.

We all must decide whether to acknowledge our own truth, that we are imperfect people doing our best, or to project our insecurities upon others.

Those who can acknowledge their own truth seek to be a part of solutions.

They engage joyfully in the process of figuring things out together.

Those who do not, complain and criticize.

In acting as if they are perfect, they would usurp the very position of God, but we know that, the more people complain, the more they hate themselves, which is the ultimate cause.

Uttering “He’s no good. Apollo baptized him!” announces one’s own inability to love oneself, and we cannot be present to God or to Jesus in others until we are present to ourselves.

Many nevertheless choose scapegoating and deflection because it is simply easier to criticize than to acknowledge one’s own shortcomings, fears, loneliness, hurt, even though all human beings share these things.

The reason politicians are so successful at sowing division is that people are hungry to embrace some means of deflection.

We tend to lap up any excuse to look down upon others, to spread fear about them.

Carl Bloch's painting, "Christ with Mocking Soldier," poignantly illustrates the psychology of scapegoating.

The contorted face of the soldier is riddled with hatred and derision, a response clearly not deserved by the gentle person at whom it is directed.

Christ stands calmly, with self-possession, without a hint of arrogance or desire for retribution.

He is not caught up in the psychological game of the soldier, but stands outside of it, comfortable with who he is.

He understands what is happening, and that knowledge is reflected in his sad but knowing gaze.

Bloch's brilliance is evident in both faces.

There is so much subtlety in Christ's face, in particular.

The sadness in his eyes is, for example, is not a self-pitying sadness.

It is not turned inward but outward, and not towards the soldier, in some form of resistance, but toward us.

Christ's expression is, moreover, not imploring.

He is not asking for helping.

He looks directly at us, as if to ask, "Are you, too, a part of this, or will you end it?" and not through violent intervention, but end it in ourselves.

Christ's is not the forceful visage of a general calling us to arms, but the gentle gaze of one urging us to truth, to self-awareness, to the kind of self-acceptance that the soldier has yet to muster.

Christ contemplates us and questions, "Will *you* be like this pitiable man?"

The soldier is indeed pitiable.

His hatred originates in himself, but is directed outwards, towards Christ.

One can imagine that many others previously have suffered the effects of the soldier's moral cowardice.

Notice how he draws close to Christ to deliver it, an indication of the weakness of the message itself.

Truth is strong enough to traverse a distance.

It does not need to be snarled into someone's face.

The soldier also seeks to buttress his message with intensity.

The louder and more repetitive people are, the less they tend to have to say.

Those who vigorously proclaim their rectitude, their patriotism, their brilliance, are not righteous or patriotic or brilliant.

Those who are righteous, patriotic, and brilliant are busy serving.

They are engrossed in the task rather than in self-promotion.

They work pragmatically, only raising their voices to call attention to the injustices suffered by others, not to their own eminence.

Those who choose to scapegoat, on the other hand, only point out such injustices in order to look superior.

They do not get their hands dirty trying to make things better.

They have all the answers and no humility.

This is what the politically correct folks got wrong, very wrong.

It became just one more way to divide.

Rather than, “We must all work to love ourselves and others,” it became, “I love gay people; you’re a cretin,” “I love Jews; you’re an idiot.”

The approach is profoundly hypocritical.

We do not end hatred by hating.

If we did, Christ would be glowering back in Bloch’s painting.

I have told you before that I find such utopianism dangerous.

It is not about pragmatically working things out together, but is based on the premise, “if everyone agreed with me, the world would be perfect.”

The corollary of this thinking is, “You are the cause of the world’s problems.”

Some utopians, like Mao, took that corollary to its logical conclusion and attempted to get rid of all those who disagreed in order to build the perfect society, but what resulted was terror, social dysfunction, and considerable hardship.

Utopianism is about appearing superior rather than resolving problems.

It prevents the pragmatic cooperation and compromise necessary to improve actual issues.

I find naive those who believe that we can end scapegoating forever, which is another form of utopianism.

This does not mean, however, that we should not fight racism and homophobia and even chocolate snobbery and all the other ways that people divide us today, but we need to be aware that, even though we completely vanquish one form, another will arise.

New ways of dividing are waiting in the wings.

It is therefore a continuous responsibility.

We must always ask the question, “How do we get to where God is leading us?” and trust that God will give us the tools to bring us there.

We stand with Christ by refusing to participate in the scapegoating and by seeking to call as many as we can to join us.

We must reject all forms of divisiveness and projection, and instead uphold a model of self-awareness, self-acceptance, and love among flawed human beings.

Until our individual heart finds healing, which is what the church is about, we will continue to look for divisions, for ways to criticize others rather than to cooperate.

We must start, as I said, by acknowledging to ourselves our own insecurities, by forgiving ourselves, letting go of our guilt and shame so that we no longer need to project it onto others, and moving forward humbly, with knowledge of God's love for us.

We acknowledge our gifts and accept our weaknesses and know that whatever mistakes we have made in the past are irrelevant to God.

What matters to God is who we are now.

We first seek healing for ourselves, and then model that for others.

As Christians, we are called to make clear that scapegoating in general is unacceptable.

For us, Jesus was the last scapegoat, the final offering.

We refuse to participate in the same form of behavior that crucified him.

We are united in the same mind and the same purpose.