

ISAIAH 9:1-4

PSALM 27:1, 4-9

I CORINTHIANS 1:10-18

MATTHEW 4:12-23

Third Sunday after the Epiphany; Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 22, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Foolish Belonging!

Herding cats! It is a cliché we have heard time and time again, a catch phrase that never fails to register in our minds, clearly conveying the intended image. While our first century Christian brothers and sisters surely did not have this phrase at their disposal, it is evident, when we read Paul's diatribe in today's Witness from the Epistles in I Corinthians, that this was the obvious behavior on display by the members of the Corinthian church. It is clear in these Pauline words that the apostle was frustrated, irritated and infuriated, at his very wit's end, annoyed at the petty arguments that were taking place in one of his prominent gentile missional outposts. Evidently, a bruhaha had developed at Corinth that was threatening the peace and harmony of the congregation, disagreements abounding as to who's sponsor was the lead dog, which disciple continued to serve as each church member's primary guide and mentor. We can only suppose that there had developed a certain status among the membership based solely on who had baptized them into the faith, thus this individual becoming and serving like a personal guru, an individualized shaman, as their most intimately influential shepherd. It should have been much ado about nothing, except that it was not. Obviously, it had become a source of consternation, conflict, controversy, and counterproductive conversation. Stop the madness! Spoiler alert! If you think that this sermon is going to be about any of us here at First Congregational United Church of Christ, you would be wrong! It's not about us, but it is a word we need to hear again through fresh lenses. We get along great! Even so, with that being acknowledged, there are some profound lessons for our contemporary consideration, as we reflect on all the histrionics that once took place back in the first century as if they were today. Let us recall once again the grumblings and rumblings rattling the Corinthian church, competition disturbing the peace, all of which demand our close attention, yes, an ancient congregational conflagration of which we should

and must turn aside and see and learn. Besides, I needed a sermon! Let's travel to Corinth this morning and see what great sights we can see!

Part of what cracks me up about this Corinthian lection is that we quickly discover that we have an insider, a mole, a snitch, a tattletale, and nobody likes anybody who goes behind somebody's back and tells on them! I still have negative transference from my traumatized elementary school years! And of course, we have to play the blame game, that it was somebody else who must have told somebody else who told somebody else and eventually the beans got spilt to Paul, from their lips to his ears. Paul says, "my brothers and sisters, Chloe's people gave me some information about you, that you're fighting with each other!" Uh oh, Chloe's people did it, they are the guilty party! Somebody went and told daddy that we are having a family squabble. Now, we are in trouble, big trouble! And so, Paul does just what we expect Paul to do, he performs an intervention, a congregational exorcism, doing so in the only way available to him at the time, by writing a letter. The apostle, he wrote me a letter! He tells them, that in the name of Christ, to agree with one another—easier said than done—and to quit choosing sides, to quit quarreling, to cease and desist from all this opinionated blather, dividing the faithful into rival groups intent on one upping one another. This is a church, a beloved faith community, a family of faith! There should be no competition, no petty gamesmanship, no quarrels, just peace and harmony. Good luck with that! The problem, or so it seems, was that different congregants had been brought into the faith and into this ancient local missional church, various members, each convert, baptized by a specific apostle or church leader and forming groups or mini communities within the larger body. We call them cliques! These members wore what should have been an incidental thing as a status symbol, a badge of honor. Well, I belong to Paul! And I belong to Apollos! Me, Cephas! Some even willing to admit that they belonged to Christ, but evidently claiming this mantle in a smug, arrogant kind of way, a title with which no one else could possibly compete. No contest! Hey everyone, look at me! I'm special! Paul asks, "Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you, or were you baptized in Paul's name? Thank God that I didn't baptize any of you. . ." And then Paul clarifies, pointing out at least three converts he actually did immerse in the baptismal waters, not remembering if there were any more. Evidently, based on his careful critiques, Paul was an obsessive detail kind of guy, yes, a stickler for details! Paul's point, get over yourselves, rediscover your common ground and act like the different kind of people you all now claim that you are. Paul then reminds these early proselytes to the new faith, in not so certain terms, that everyone is equal at the foot of the cross, a level playing field in which everyone had the

same opportunities, the same standing, the same goals. Paul's conclusion, at least as far as today's epistle lection is concerned, is that "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved!" End of discussion! Case closed!

So, after hearing about this Corinthian fussing and fighting, what does any of this have to say to us here at First Congregational, a people who are living a most peaceable existence, a beloved faith community made up of folks who really do seem to like each other and get along so well? Well, there is always something lurking in even the most obscure text, even in a narrative that apparently fails to speak a word, that does not seem to have a word, indicating nothing of relevance, to our circumstances and situation. Indeed, it does! For every now and then it is always important for us to pause, to stop in our tracks, yes, to cease and desist for a brief while, and do a corporate inventory of who we are being and what we are doing as beloved faith community, demanding a continuous reassessment, reexamination, of our collective mission and ministry. Sometimes it is a good thing to stop what we are doing, smell the roses, and check the fragrance! Frankly, it is not a bad thing to do in our personal lives, nothing wrong with a little introspection, some inward focused therapeutic analysis! I would argue that while it is important that all congregations of every stripe, denominational and not, turn aside and do this kind of intentional and intensive work, it is paramount, most important and essential that churches like ours, our polity nicely grounded in the Free Church tradition, churches that follow the historic principles of the "congregational way", do exactly that. It is imperative! It really is not an option if we are to keep the organism healthy, the system running smoothly! We can either operate like a well-oiled machine, or we can have a lot of cogs in the system, some clogs in the fuel line. In other words, we can be the human equivalent of cats in need of serious herding, knowing the impossibility that often comes with that challenging task. The good news is that we are not cats but are human beings. That being said, to quote my major professor Dr. Malan Nel, just because we are a part of a flock, does not make us sheep either. We must be the independent thinkers we are designed to be while being interdependent and all at the same time. Yes, we must learn how to walk and chew gum ecclesially, practically, and theologically. A refresher course, however so brief, is good for us all, good for the spirit, good for the soul, good for what ails us even when nothing apparently does.

And of course, there is a method to my madness as I join with Paul expressing some general concerns about our ecclesial body politic. As you are aware, over the last

several months the Church Council has been preparing a Strategic Plan which will become the visioning statement of and for the congregation, guiding this local missional church for the next few years, such plans typically having a short shelf life, only good for about a five-year run. Once in place this document will give direction regarding every decision and initiative. It will be much more than words on a page! Prior to the holiday festivities, way back when, opportunities were made available to the congregation to engage some town hall type listening sessions. They were not exactly well attended, enthusiasm a bit tepid, lukewarm at best! Many privately spoke to me and said that they were happy with the congregation's direction and thus they did not see the need to put in their two coins worth. Well folks, like the widow in the Gospel story, your two mites, cents and sense, mean a mite more than you might imagine. The intersection I see with today's Pauline musings occurs at the confluence of all the many fabulous ideas that are constantly floating around these walls, great ideas by numerous people. At some point we need to harness this energy and this is where our corporate work, Council and congregation collide. Yes, we need to find consensus and move in one direction. The road sign I saw as a teenager in Atlanta still resonates, "Give gap, take gap!" For our beloved system to work effectively, even fantastically, it means that everyone gets some things, and everyone gives up some things, everybody is happy and a bit disappointed and all at the same time. The bottom line is that we need your valuable input! I need your valuable input!

As a church affiliated with our beloved United Church of Christ, we truly believe that God is still speaking and that God has a particular, a peculiar, word for our congregation in this time and in this space. Yes, while we often struggle to name it, using much subtly and nuance, we know that in theory and practice we are categorically different, our narrative is counter cultural, counter intuitive, to our fellow, neighboring Christian brothers and sisters. We might as well name it and claim it, confess it, possess it! Part of the reason for the challenges in Corinth stem from the fact that outside of Athens, assuming a church may have been planted there, Paul being the Johnny Appleseed of church starts wherever he went, this was probably the most multicultural city in which Paul established a church. This enclave represented the most diversity of the numerous Hellenistic, Greek influenced, metropolitan bergs to which Paul brought his evangelistic missionary message. It only goes to reason, that despite their conversion, that these local inhabitants continued to express their varied viewpoints, had their own strong opinions, reflecting cultural idioms, the norms and mores, that were germane to their tradition. Conversion in some ways is like turning off a light switch, you never forget what you saw. Very few are able or even desire to

ignore their past. We are always a present product of who we once were and have always been. And so, Corinth represented the height of eclectic pluralism, and no amount of whitewashed preaching would ever bleach that beautiful coloration out of any of these committed congregants. Paul knew that! The challenge was not to make homogenized, homogeneous, robotical zombies out of them, turning them into Kool Aid drinking lemmings, but was to harness all their unique giftedness, while making sure that they were of one accord, everyone swimming upstream, and that tie that bound them was indeed Christ Jesus. **As we have painfully learned over two thousand years of Church history, there are multiple ways to interpret and invoke the gospel and not all of them are inherently correct, good or productive, efficacious, having salvific qualities in the least. We do not have to be reminded of the many significant differences throughout Christendom both in belief and faith and in practice.**

Paul reminded his Corinthian flock, that no matter their opinion or who appropriately groomed them into the faith, that in the legacy of Jesus they were to become one, even if and when they went rogue, acting like felines. Hence, Paul ends our lection today by reminding this diverse congregation that they were all equal, level, at the foot of the cross. Paul reminded them that what their friends and family considered foolish, a fair accusation considering their radical decision to reject the many religious expressions available to them, to jettison the faith traditions of their forebears, and just settle on this most bizarre, this most strange aberrative religion that even advocates for sacrificial cannibalism in its weekly ritual practices, among other weird ideas. Indeed, this seemed like sheer and utter foolishness, a most foolish foolishness that showed them what for them was a better, more excellent, way. The challenge then and the challenge now is to maintain, to sustain, what makes us unique, what makes us who we are. It also matters that we channel all our giftedness, spiritual gifts being something Paul addresses elsewhere in his rambling writings. Our goal, our task, is to focus our best selves into becoming the very best local expression of the body of Christ we can possibly be. It takes all of us, all hands-on deck!

In the Gospel stories we read on these Sundays after the Epiphany, we read of Jesus' call to the original twelve disciples. What we will learn about them, warts and all, is that they each had strong willed personalities, that each apostle was unique, distinctive, in their giftedness, a lot like a herd of cats. Whether by accident or intent, Jesus chose a diverse group, despite their coming from one religious tradition, in Judaism. That being acknowledged, Jesus ever expanding following represented a paradigm for the early Church, reflecting every human demographic imaginable, a template reflecting the

realm of God as best illustrated in the Great Banquet Feast in which everyone was invited. The very foundation, the cornerstone, of Jesus' outreach was to literally build a rainbow coalition, an arc above humanity revealing every color, every color combination, that could ever be perceived, a mirror, a reflection, of the Divine, the very embodiment of eternal holiness. Divinity is in our DNA! Foolish belonging indeed! And **each one of us, here in this special place, this sacred setting, now are tasked with crafting our own interpretive vision of what the world can be as once seen through the eyes of Jesus and his followers and generations thereafter, and now shown through us, bringing God's realm as close as it will ever be in this life. What an awesome, audacious, task! Are you up for it? The answer will speak volumes about who we are and where we are going, building on a great past, the proof of the pudding that our predecessors had a grand, the greatest vision, and knew what they were doing. Indeed, we have this treasure in an earthen vessel, a sacred trust! Ours to preserve, protect, and increase for future generations! Yes, they definitely, beyond a shadow of all doubt, knew what they were about as a people called to follow in Jesus' footsteps as they carefully, meticulously and painstakingly, built this church, people and building. What a heritage! What an heirloom! What a legacy! What will those who come after us say about us! The time is always now! So, let's herd some cats! Let's keep on foolishly belonging, welcoming everyone as we go! God bless and Godspeed!**

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and bids us foolishly belong, following one who was most mistaken for the ultimate fool of all! Amen and amen.