

## I

“Daddy, did you vote for the boy or the girl?”

It was the day of the 2016 election, and my oldest boys were five years old, in their first semester of kindergarten. They were obviously very young, but they were observant and astute enough to understand that something big was happening in our world, and the grownups were all talking about it, so they wanted to know if I voted for the boy or the girl.

And I didn’t tell them.

Not because I don’t want them to know and understand how I view the world, how I apply my understanding of theology and ethics in the voting booth. I didn’t tell them because I knew that that coming Sunday, they were sure to march into their Sunday School class and announce to everyone present how their father, who in their little minds was the “boss of this church,” had voted.

## II

And such is the nature of the strange, hyper-partisan times in which we live, isn’t it? Because if you know how someone voted, you can then make all kinds of assumptions and inferences about them. You can place them into categories, you can put labels on them, you can decide if they are friend or foe, you can decide if they are “one of us” or “one of them” simply by knowing which box they checked in the voting booth.

Now, before you get anxious that I’m about to “preach politics from the pulpit,” let me remind you once again that the world “politics” is derived from the Greek word *polis*, which means the city or the community. So at its base meaning, political topics and conversations are simply debates and conversations about the public good. And so by that definition, the gospel is inherently political, because the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is inherently about the flourishing and well-being of people.

But most of our conversations these days aren’t political – they’re partisan. Our conversations are not about the public good – they’re about promoting “our side” and discrediting and destroying “the other side.”

And that brings us to our text this morning from 1 Corinthians.

## III

More than half of the books that make up the New Testament aren’t actually books in the classic sense – rather, they’re letters. And most of the letters in the New Testament were written by a man named Paul, who, even though he wasn’t one of the original 12 disciples, nevertheless became the most important and influential theologian, pastor, and church planter of the first century.

The Book of Acts records several of Paul’s missionary journeys, wherein he took the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ from Jerusalem and spread

it across the Mediterranean basin. Paul had been born and raised as a Jew, and so ordinarily when he came to a city, he would first enter the synagogue and engage with the Jews in that city and testify to them that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the long-promised, long-awaited Messiah foretold by the Hebrew scriptures.

One of Paul's missionary journeys took him to the city of Corinth, which sits astride a narrow strip of land that connects the Peloponnesian peninsula with mainland Greece. Corinth was a seaport and major center of trade and commerce, and consequently, Corinth may have well been one of the most diverse cities of its day. Paul lived and worked in Corinth for quite some time, and his preaching and evangelism led to the establishment of a community of Christians in the city.

After quite some time, Paul's journeys took him onward to other lands. But there was trouble brewing in the Corinthian church. And apparently, the trouble grew potent enough that someone from that church took it upon themselves to write a letter to their founding pastor and asked him to weigh in on several matters of controversy. And so what we have before us in 1 Corinthians is Paul's response to that report of trouble.

Our reading this morning picks up in the first chapter at verse 10, after Paul has offered his initial greetings. So I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from 1 Corinthians 1:10-18.

*Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.*

*For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

#### IV

To whom do you say you belong, my friend? In these polarized times in which we live, it seems to me that the powers that be don't just want you to vote for them – they want you to *belong* to them.

They want your self-understanding, your hopes and dreams

for yourself and your posterity, your view of our country and its place in the world, indeed, your very *identity* to *belong* to them. That's why we hear so much these days about "identity politics." Most of the public debate you're hearing these days isn't about policy or the public good – it's about how the other side is an existential threat that must be defeated at all costs.

So let me ask you again, my friend. To whom do you really belong? To whom do you owe your allegiance? Do you belong to the Donkey? Do you belong to the Elephant? Were you baptized into the Donkey? Was the Elephant crucified for you?

Or was it the Lamb?

Here's the really, really hard thing about this text for me, and maybe for you, too, I imagine. Because the text shines a big bright light on the message about the cross. Actually, a better translation of Paul's Greek is not the message about the cross, but rather, the *word of the cross*.

And the word of the cross says that those people on the other side, those ones who I think are dumber than a post, those ones who I think represent an existential threat to our country and the health and safety of my family and those whom I love – the word of the cross says that you're not allowed to hate them.

In fact, it's worse than that. The word of the cross says that I have to love them. I have to pray for them – not pray

that they'd trip and fall flat on their face – but I have to pray that they would find everything in their lives that I want in my own – peace, prosperity, well-being.

The word of the cross says that when those people on the other side are mean to me, when they frighten me, or even, God-forbid, should they try to harm me, I must put away my sword, for those who live by the sword will die by the sword. The word of the cross says that I have to love my enemies and pray for those who would persecute me.

And it's so hard for us, friends, especially when I'm frightened. Especially when there's so much confusion in the world. Especially when we're all so very tired.

The word of the cross *is* foolishness, because in this world, might makes right. The word of the cross *is* foolishness, because in this world, life *is* a zero-sum game – in order for our side to win, the other side has to lose. The word of the cross *is* foolishness, because in this world, money and power are the only things that matter.

But the word of the cross is that these are not the final things.

The word of the cross is that there is more to this life than what you can see, hold, and buy.

The word of the cross is that goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, and in the end, love wins.

A wise preacher from right here in Georgia once taught us that with hate, you can kill an enemy. With hate, you can vanquish a foe. But hate cannot drive out hate. Violence cannot drive out violence. Darkness cannot drive out darkness. Love is the only power in the universe that can turn an enemy into a friend.

The message of the cross is foolishness to the powers that be in this world, but to us who are being saved, it is the very power of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.