

**Sermon Bytes: An uneasy unity**  
**Matthew 4:12–23**

**January 22, 2017**  
Rev. Bill McAuslan, Crossroads United Church

“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”. – 1 Corinthians 10:1

Christians behaving badly? Surely not! But we know differently, however much we wish the life of discipleship in community would more resemble a cake walk than a food fight. Schism and division amongst God’s people is not new. Whether that should comfort or afflict, I’ll let you decide.

It seems pretty clear how apostle, evangelist, and church-planter Paul felt about unity and division. I sense behind his words a hint of weariness, tinged by frustration, yet tempered by his love for and devotion to this particular quarrelsome and querulous community.

A lifetime of participation, leadership and observation of faith communities has proven that the sinful side of human nature will invariably rise to the surface given enough time. The brokenness of our human condition causes all manner of meddling, miscommunication, and mischief within the flock.

I remember I worked in one situation where after 70 years of working together in the same pastoral charge, two churches had to go their own ways after a student minister had tried out some new scheme on them. And now they could not find a way to get beyond the hurt. Here’s a true story from a church in Florida celebrating 50 years together: They had ordered some tee shirts and a banner to pass out to the membership as part of the celebration. The colour – orange of course - unfortunately was an exact match to one of the primary colours of nearby University of Florida. On the other hand, the colours of Florida State were crimson and gold, and the church was half way between the two schools. Within the year the church was split. One half had left and started a new church In the public school down the road

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A few things to note. Paul address the church as brothers and sisters. At this point the membership of the church has not been divided into male and female. He literally says be of one mind and one purpose. He then speaks of the division in their ranks as he gives the names of different early leaders, Appolos, and Peter and Paul. And he reminds them of the works of baptism. It was not in the name of the person, but rather in the name of Christ. The one mind they were to have – was that of Jesus. Later Paul will tell the church in Rome “We are one in Christ because we are one in his baptism”.

I was struck this week by some of the inauguration celebrations south of the border.

The incoming President in his inaugural speech said that he was the President of all Americans, and now was the time for America to come together. And yet when hundreds of thousands of Americans gathered to protest his language - far more than who had gathered in celebration the day before - his press secretary tried to dismiss them by saying that they weren't as many as they seemed. And he claimed that the American media had went out of its way to down play the inauguration celebration numbers and to play up the protest celebration numbers by playing around with camera angles. Only it turns out that they used the same camera locations that had been approved by the incoming regime for the inauguration. So he was really disputing the work of his own team.

One of the highlights of the day of protest was the ordinariness of the leadership. Over and over again, someone - usually a woman - decided that she had to go to Washington to raise her voice against the constant barrage of racist, anti woman, Islamophobic, anti-Mexican, anti-GBLTQ that has spewed forth from the Trump camp. And in speaking to their neighbours they have said, "I want to go too. I want my voice to be heard. I want the world to know where I stand. And it isn't with anything that comes out of the Mouth of Mr Trump".

And so people called around. And they came by the train load, And by the plane load. And by the bus load. People concerned for the rights of immigrants, women, LGBTQ, Muslims and many, many others. Many different causes. All with one voice

We are only a few days into the new American Presidency and 20 million fewer Americans have access to affordable health care, subsidies have been cut for everything from education to agriculture, billions of dollars of taxes on the rich have been repealed, the intelligence agencies were given a pat on the back and then had their mandate cut. But the big news from the President's Press Secretary is that the media is lying about the comparative sizes of the inauguration day crowd and that does not count the millions that marched in protest in 70 + cities around the world.

I don't know about you folks, but I think it's going to be a long 4 years, and the only ones who will be happy are comedians and the news media. Hey - it may be a wreck – but it's still news eh?

I know that a lot of people are looking at what is going on and getting really anxious. because none of it seems to make sense and believe me I'm with you there. But as people of faith I want to remind you - people of faith have been there before. In fact each of our lessons refers to times of turmoil in the nation of Israel, in the church in Corinth and within the disciples themselves.

In Isaiah – the prophet describes a gift of hope that comes in the midst of Assyria's occupation of Israel,

In the Psalm - David's fear of attack by surrounding enemies reminds him to trust in the Lord at all times

In Corinth – Paul tries to give some calming and informing words to a group that is splintering

In Matthew, John the Baptist's arrest and imprisonment seem to be the catalyst for Jesus to head back to Galilee

In each of these passages the ultimate effect is to provide light to guide the way, comfort to give surety and warmth, and hope to keep moving towards a new tomorrow.

We need a sense of God's enfolding presence of dwelling secure in God's house, of being claimed by God's love. All of these passages reflect this need, and all of them offer a vision of God's faithful response. They also remind us that when we work together, we can change the world

I will finish today the words of St. Teresa of Avila the Spanish mystic from the mid 1500's:

Christ has no hands but our hands to do his work today;  
Christ has no feet but our feet to lead others in his way;  
Christ has no voice but our voice to tell others how he lived and died;  
Christ has no help but our help to lead them to his side.