

Texts: Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

What a week it has been! We have inaugurated Donald Trump to be the 45th President of the United States. Earlier in the week we honored the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. who gave us a dream of a nation where every person would be judged not be the color of his or her skin but by the content of their character.

I am sure that each one of us adults can trace our own lives through the lens of who was President at certain important moments. Dwight Eisenhower was President when I was born. I was only 5 when President Kennedy was assassinated, but I remember my mother crying in front of the television. When I was 13, my family took a vacation to Washington, DC and my parents pointed out the Watergate Hotel to me – the place where President Nixon’s henchmen broke in to the Democratic National Committee office and began a scandal that eventually brought him down. My first vote in a presidential election was for Jimmy Carter when I was in college. Ever since then it has been important to me to vote.

Most of us can tell a similar story of our lives in the church. Who baptized you? Who confirmed you? Who was your favorite Pastor? Here at Immanuel, the three names I hear the most often are: Pastor Jerry Flathman, who served in the late 1950’s; Pastor Bruce Baum, who served in the 1980’s, and Pastor Allan Schmidt, who served in the 1990’s and whose removal was a crisis moment for this congregation. Some of you remember that. I grew up at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Los Alamos, New Mexico. I can’t remember the name of the pastor who baptized me, but it was Pastor Parker Anspach who confirmed me, and Pastor Calder Gibson who married John and me. When I lived in New York, I attended Holy Trinity, where Pastor Richard Jeske broke open for me the meaning

of God's grace in a way that I had never heard before. But at same the time the congregation was divided over his compensation, and the arguments between those who supported him and those who wanted him gone became extremely nasty. The church is not immune from infighting and factions.

Our nation is extremely divided right now. Some people believe that President Trump is a breath of fresh air, that he will lead this nation in a whole new direction of putting America and its people first. Some people believe that our new President articulates a fear and a xenophobia that will bring this nation to isolate itself from both global economics and the gifts of other cultures. I know that folks here hold the opinions of both sides. How do we continue to live together and do God's work at this moment in time?

This morning I turn to the apostle Paul for help in answering that question.

The church in Corinth was divided in several different ways. There were those who thought of themselves as more "spiritual" than others. There were those who were wealthier than others. There were those who considered themselves wiser than others. There were both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. And the divisions played out by becoming factions. Different factions claimed to belong to Paul, or to Apollos, or to Cephas (that's Peter.) I'm better than you because of who baptized me. I have a favorite pastor and I follow that person, to the exclusion of anyone else.

Paul begins by appealing to the congregation in Corinth in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. It's not about Paul or any of the other pastors they may have had. It's about Jesus. Jesus, who called disciples from every walk of life. Rich people and poor people. Zealots who wanted to overthrow Rome and tax collectors who collaborated with Rome.

Fishermen. Women. Disciples who thought themselves better than others because they were in Jesus' inner circle and had the gall to ask Jesus to seat them at his right and left hand in his kingdom. A disciple who, when the going got tough, denied that he ever knew Jesus. A disciple who betrayed him so that the authorities could put him to death.

Paul appeals to the congregation in Corinth to be united in the same mind – the mind of Christ. To have the mind of Christ means to think like Jesus did. And Jesus did not think in terms of insiders or outsiders, us or them, Jews or Gentiles. Jesus healed everyone who came to him. Jesus proclaimed the good news of the kingdom to everyone who could hear him. Jesus fed 5,000 people with a few loaves and fish and didn't ask where they came from. Jesus told parables about how God welcomes the lost and the wandering, no matter who they were or what they had done in their past.

To be baptized, according to Paul, is to be baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection. In baptism, you die to the old self that you used to be and you are reborn to a new life, a life that is united to Christ. In baptism, you are reborn of water and the Holy Spirit. In baptism, all the old ways of defining yourself have been washed away. And the way you define yourself now is by the cross of Christ. The cross that Christ died on. The cross that signifies God's power to resurrect.

The cross is the central symbol of our faith. And here is what Paul has to say about it: "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

Quite a few churches have removed the cross from their sanctuary. For some reason, there are Christian leaders who think that having a cross up front is something of a downer, that it only reminds people of how sinful they are. We can't be reminding people

of their weakness when what we really want to do is to empower them. This past week, I spent some time in a big bookstore in Rapid City, browsing through the Christian section. There are a lot of books there that have been written to motivate and inspire you, mentally, physically and spiritually. Books with titles like: *Your Best Destiny*, *Power Thoughts*, and *You Can, You Will*.

I wonder how much those books talk about the cross of Christ. I wonder how much they talk about what it means to have the mind of Christ. Because the power of the cross, as Paul puts it, is not strength but weakness. The power of the cross is not winning, but losing. The power of the cross is not achieving your highest and best self but about being completely undeserving of the grace you have received.

When we know ourselves to be redeemed by the power of the cross of Christ, we know ourselves to be changed from the inside out. There is no longer slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, male or female, Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative, white or black.

The message of the cross is peace, not violence.

The message of the cross is hunger and thirst for justice, not complacency about the status quo.

The message of the cross is compassion, not indifference.

The message of the cross is reconciliation, not division.

The message of the cross is forgiveness, not accusation.

The message of the cross is this: You die. And then you live. You die to whatever identity or self-definition or success you thought you had. And then you live in a whole new way. Because Christ lives in you.

This does not mean that we give up our opinions. This does not mean that there will never again be disagreements or division in our congregation or in our community or in our nation. But what the church must be is the place where we can come together and talk. The church must be the place where we come together and listen. The church must be the place where what unites us is vastly more than what divides us. Because what unites us is Christ himself. And for those of us who are being saved, that is the power of God.