**Everyone Belongs February 19, 2017**

1 Cor. 3:1-9

**Children's Sermon: The Hats We Wear**

A few weeks ago, I went back to Oregon. I went to see my parents. My Mom and Dad live in Eugene, OR at the southern end of the Willamette, Valley. It was a great visit. And while driving across Oregon, I decided to go back to my old alma mater, that's my old college, for the purpose of buying a baseball hat. I guess I realized, that over the years, I have been wearing a lot of hats, but none from my own college. I have hat from Oregon State (that's where my wife went to school) I have a hat from The University of Oregon (that's where my brother and father got their Masters degrees) I have a hat representing *The Hillsboro Hops,* a AAA baseball team in HIllsboro, Oregon. I have never attended a game, but I have their hat. And I have a hat from a restuarant in Maine where I ate my first lobster. I'm thinking about buying a UVA Cavalier hat, but give me a few years.

So I went to my old college, and I bought a Western Oregon State University hat. Go Wolves! I think I'm the only one in the state of Virginia who has one. Do you think it matters which hat we wear? Sometimes. A hat with some words or a certain logo on it can tell us a little about a person, but certainly not everything. Do you think God cares about which hat we wear? It goes back to that old saying, "You can't tell a book by it's cover." In other words, we can't assume to really know or understand anyone until we start talking with them, walking with them, asking them questions, and learning about him or her. So take moment this week, to look past the hat, look past what someone is wearing, look past their skin color, look past how different he is she is from you. Look a little deeper. That guy wearing a Western Oregon State College hat may end up being a very special person in your life.

**Introduction Before Sermon**

Many years ago, I served a small country parish with two worship services: 8:00 and 10:30. The 8:00 service was mostly composed of families who lived on farms and tree nurseries. Long before 8:00, these church members were up early doing their chores, milking cows and feeding livestock. And so when I told them I thought the morning service was too early, they laughed at me. After all, they had already been up and working in the hours before sunrise. The 8:00 service was filled with praise music. Not my favorite. But these early-worshippers loved it. And while, to me, the songs sounded more like long commercial jingles or songs that went on and on with no clear ending, the 60-70 people who came to the 8:00 service sang these verses over and over again with gusto.

At the 10:30 service, we were all very Presbyterian. We sang from the hymnal. I wore a robe, I preached from the pulpit, no praise music, almost like this, service, but at 8:00, you might have thought you stepped into a Vineyard Fellowship or an Assembly of God Church or a Southern Baptist congregation. One service was decent and in order and very Reformed and the other was not. Don't get me wrong, I had a good relationship with both groups. I loved them and they loved me as their pastor. And, it didn't seem to matter if you went to the 8:00 service or the 10:30, the people loved their church.

But when I left that congregation for a new Call, the early service disbanded and most of folks joined The Assembly of God Church in town. And looking back, I have always thought that was a tragedy. I can only assume the farmers and praise song singers didn't feel like they belonged anymore.

In part, my country church experience with two very different worshipping styles reminds me of the Church in Corinth. Paul writes to a church with divided loyalties. At first, it may not have been all that obvious. No one may have noticed or acknowledged the people were drifting apart from one another, but slowly, over time, this congregation that Paul planted, nurtured and loved was breaking into two camps. I know exactly how he feels.

As much we want people to come together on Sunday morning and set aside their differences and worship God together, let's be honest: sometimes our differences pull and tear and divide us.

After all, what did MLK Jr. once say? *"We must face the fact that in America, the church is still the most segregated major institution in America. At 11:00 on Sunday morning when we stand and sing that Christ has no east or west, we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation [and] this is a tragedy."*

**Prayer**

**Grace-Filled and Inclusive God, teach us what it means to belong. Teach us to be the church that stands and sings, “In Christ there is no East or West, in him no North or South" and to believe it. Help us fight the fight against indifference and prejudice. And if we meet someone today who comes from different theological place than we do; if that person sings different songs than we do or wears a different hat from our own, open our hearts, open our spirits, open our ears, and remind us that in your kingdom, everyone belongs. Amen.**

**Sermon**

To me, what's striking about 1 Corinthians chapters 2 and 3, is that while, at first, Paul describes in detail what a spiritual person looks like compared to an unspiritual person, when he turns his attention to the Corinthian Church, he doesn't pull any punches. He tells the Corinthians, without apology: "You may have thought you were spiritual people, but you're not." Up to this point in 1 Cor., Paul has described a spiritual person as one who relies on the Spirit and who doesn't worry about what others think of his or her faith in Jesus Christ, but then, without warning, Paul almost insults them. He tells them to grow up. In essence, he writes to his beloved church: *"You may have thought you were spiritual and wise and had all of these spiritual gifts. You may have been patting yourselves on the back. You may have thought you had it all together as a faith community, but according to the criteria I have just described in terms of who is spiritual and who is not, you're babies. Your faith is infantile."*

It's quite the rhetorical slap.

It must have felt like their former pastor had just thrown ice water in their faces. Whereas many in that congregation had assumed that their church was fine and probably looked fine on the outside and had a balanced budget, a large parking lot, a talented staff, prominent civic leaders on session, a quality worship, and was giving over 20% of their budget to the community and global missions, Paul is clearly not impressed.

Reflecting back on a previous visit with them, Paul writes:

"For my part, my brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as I should speak to people who have the Spirit. I had to deal with you like infants. So, I gave you milk to drink, instead of solid food for which you were not yet ready. And you're still not ready. Indeed, so as long as there is jealousy (i.e. ***zelos, (GK)*** envy or rivalry among you) and quarreling **(i.e. *eres (GK)***wrangling or defensiveness), as long as these things exist in your community, you will never be ready for solid food and, subsequently, you cannot claim to be spiritual."

It's the same trouble (or assumptions we stir up) when we casually tell someone which college or university we attended. I graduated from Duke. I graduated from UVA. I went to Virginia Tech. I graduated UNC. I graduated from a small cow-town college in the middle of farmer's field called Western Oregon State University. (And I have the hat to prove it!)

And what happens when we tell someone which brand of religion we adhere to: I'm Episcopalian. I'm a Vineyard Fellowship person. I'm Presbyterian. I'm from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. I go to Westminster Presbyterian Church on Rugby Road. I go to Zion Union Baptist Church on Preston Ave. And by telling that person our flavor of religion or upon hearing which church they go to, we begin to put that person in a certain category or box.

Paul writes, "For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What then is Paul?. . . (vs. 9) For we are God's servants, working together. . . . "

I think Paul is simply saying: ***Everyone Belongs!***

About a year and a half ago, I was sitting in a meeting with faith leaders in San Jose, CA planning the first Annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Service in Silicon Valley: Muslim, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Buddhist, Presbyterian, Jewish, Hindu, and representatives from two other religious communities: a pastor from The Center for Spiritual Enlightenment and several representatives from Sa Baba, a Hindu sect that worshipped in a school down the street from us.

It had taken me 9 years to gather this group together. Every year before this one, no one had seemed interested in an Interfaith Thanksgiving Service. But here we were! All wearing our different hats! All gathered around a common table in the church library. As the meeting began, it surprised me how suspicious religious leaders were of one another. My first question was, "Why are you here?" And as we went around the table answering this question, I wasn't completely sure we would be able to pull off this event. Indeed, after going around and introducing ourselves, only a few committed to participating in the service.

But then, we started to laugh. We started to have fun. We listened to each other. And, ultimately, we created an Interfaith Thanksgiving Eve Service that began with the sound of the Jewish Shofar and the Islamic Call to Prayer and ended with a Buddhist chant, bells, and all of us singing a Sa Baba hymn of praise. And the most moving part for me was the moment afterwards when all those religious leaders, all those leaders who were at first so skeptical, stood with their arms around each other in front of the sanctuary.

That's what it will take. To those who say *I belong to that* group and those who say, *I belong to this group*; to bring these divergent groups together, I think it will take people who are willing to step out of their comfort zones. It will take people who are willing to cross lines of segregation and transcend long-held assumptions. It will take people like Paul Saunier who recently passed away at the age of 95. As many of you know, in the 1960s, Paul Saunier worked tirelessly to integrate UVA by aggressively recruiting black students. He believed that everyone belonged. We need more Paul Saunier(s).

"What then is Apollos? What is Paul?" Paul wrote to his divided church. "But servants through whom you came to believe. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."

Growing up in Beaverton, OR, our family had a garden in the backyard. I remember my dad special-ordering vegetable seeds every year. We grew corn. We grew green beans, cucumbers, tomatoes, and zucchinis. One year, we grew sunflowers. We had a row of raspberries. And some years were better than others. But the greatest crop we ever had were some rogue watermelons that came out of a compost pile one summer. The melons must have sprouted from some seeds and rinds we threw away after a family picnic. The large watermelons were heavy and sweet. They spread their thick vines through the neighbor's fences and watermelons grew for them. Of course, the irony was that despite what my father had planned and prepared for, something else, something much greater, was growing in the garden.

As I've been the pastor at Westminster Pres. for these last 6 months, I think there is potential for growth here. Don't you think?! Now as Presbyterians, being Presbyterian, we may try to contain this growth; we attempt to analyze it or put into the rows or control it or build fences or appoint a task force to explore it, but I'm with Paul. Because in the end, all we can really do is plant and water, but it is God who gives the growth. So let us continue to plant. And let us water. And let's listen to each other. And let us have faith, and let's see what God will do. Amen.