

“Party Politics”

Is. 9:1-4, I Cor. 1:10-18, Mt. 4:12-23
Hope Church, Jan. 27, 2007, Lynn Japinga

So do you belong to the Calvin party? Or the Hope party? Did you cheer for one of the basketball teams yesterday? Or are you happy to say you are not a part of either institution? Somebody once said that an atheist was somebody who went to the Hope-Calvin game and didn't care who won.

We say, “I belong to Hope” or “I belong to Calvin” around here, and it has something to do with loyalty to basketball and education. But Hope-Calvin is a little different from Duke and North Carolina, or Michigan and Ohio State, because there is a religious dimension to this rivalry. It's not just about who plays a better game of basketball, but who has the better faith, church, and college. Who are the superior Christians? Who has the most theologically correct church? Who does God like more?

What about your political loyalties? In this seemingly endless primary race, each candidate must say over and over again why he or she will make the smartest and most effective president, and why their opponents are not fit to hold office. Each candidate wants you to say that you belong to them. My son Mark is registered to vote in Iowa where he goes to college, and he attended the caucuses early in January. In the caucuses, people do not color in the circle on a ballot. They go to either the Democratic or the Republican caucus, and they stand in a certain spot under a sign or a picture to declare that they belong to this particular candidate.

This year the primaries have been intriguingly complicated, because they are about so much more than politics. People choose to belong to one candidate or another based on race, or gender, or religion, or even their feelings about a divorced president.

For many people there is a religious dimension to this rivalry. It is not just about who will make the better president, but who is the superior Christian? Who has the most theologically correct proposals? Who does God like more?

The church in Corinth had its own struggles with party politics. Christians were loyal to different leaders. I belong to Paul, some said. I belong to Cephas or to Apollos. Perhaps their loyalties depended on whose preaching they preferred. Perhaps they appreciated the ministry of the person who had brought them into the church or baptized them. But while appreciating your pastor can be a good thing, it got out of hand in this community. Each group thought it was superior to the others. Each group thought it was the most theologically correct. They didn't respect each other's faith. They certainly did not need to listen to or learn from the Christians in the other groups.

That may seem a bit irrelevant to you now, but what if we changed the names a bit? I belong to John Calvin. I belong to Martin Luther. I belong to the pope. In the past those identities have been more powerful and divisive than they are now. In the 1960 presidential election, some people refused to vote for John F. Kennedy because he was Catholic. Some of you remember times when it was considered dangerous for a Protestant to marry a Catholic. And in Western Michigan, fifty years ago, some people considered it a mixed marriage when a Reformed Hope graduate married a Christian Reformed Calvin graduate! People who belonged to one religious group often had little respect for the faith of others.

We have become a little more open-minded. Now some Christians change denominations almost as often as they change the oil in their car. Many of my students have no idea what distinguishes a Lutheran from a Catholic, or the RCA from the Christian Reformed Church, or a Presbyterian from a Methodist. The differences in

theology and practice just don't matter as much as they used to. And a number of mega churches have drawn thousands of members precisely because they say that denominational distinctives don't matter any more. So maybe this text is irrelevant.

But what if we changed the names again? Do you ever hear people say something like this? I belong to the liberals. I belong to the conservatives. I belong to the hymnbook. I belong to the praise band and the music on a screen. I belong to Right to Life. I belong to the peace group. And I don't think much of those other Christians. They are wrong. I am right. We have nothing to learn from each other and it is pointless to talk because we can't get along.

Does that sound more familiar?

Even within the RCA there are right wing groups and left wing groups and they don't have much in common. Some care deeply about church growth and others care deeply about liturgy and theology. Each has some doubts about the faith and integrity and commitment of the other. Each tends to think that it is superior to the others.

And that is the real danger of party politics. When one group thinks that its view of the truth is the only truth, and that everyone else is wrong. When one group will no longer listen to the others. When one group assumes that everybody else ought to think just like they do. Then the Christian faith is in deep trouble.

Paul had some sarcastic words for the church in Corinth. "Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?" Of course not. It was foolish to let party politics interfere with Christian community. The church did not draw its life and identity from its preachers or baptizers. The validity of church did not depend upon personal liturgical preferences or commitments to social

causes. The identity and validity and integrity of the church came out of the cross of Christ.

His readers would not have liked this idea. The cross? Paul must be exaggerating. The cross was such an ugly and painful symbol. It was a tool of brutal execution. The cross was a symbol of failure. Jesus lost the battle. He was crucified.

Exactly, Paul said. The cross is the center of the church.

Party politics is all about winning. Not so much who is right, but who can befriend enough lobbyists and raise enough money and win enough votes.

And sometimes the church gets caught up in party politics too. Certain religious leaders take pride in the fact that they have regular telephone conversations with President Bush. Or churches think that if they raise the most money and bring in the most members that they have won, and they are successful.

But Jesus was not a winner. He had no “spin doctors” to put the best face on his hard words. He did not make empty easy promises. He did not cater to the special interest groups. He called people to repent. He called people to leave their work and their families and follow him. And in the end he died.

The cross ought to be the center of the church, Paul said, precisely because it was a sign of powerlessness and defeat. God doesn’t work through dramatic displays. God did not make Jesus descend from heaven in pomp and circumstance to be a king who would take over the world. God sent a baby, who lived a simple life and died a brutal death. But was through that birth and life and death that God brought salvation and wholeness to the world.

Paul does not say that we all have to think and act identically. Later in the letter he talks about the church as a body with many different parts that are all equally valuable.

But the church cannot be about judgment and superiority and party politics. Much as I hate to admit it, God does not love the Hope party better than the Calvin party.

We belong to God. We are God's people. God has reached out to us in love and brought us in to God's party. And there is great comfort in knowing that ultimately the Christian faith is not about us. It is not about who baptized us or who is our favorite minister or theologian. It is not about worship style or social issues or even about being liberal or conservative. It's about being disciples of Jesus Christ who preached the gospel, who healed, who loved, and who died.

When we are asked where we belong, where our loyalty is, we go to stand under the cross.