

### ***Tongue Tangled***

In the name of him who bids us, “Leave your lives of sin, take up your cross, and follow me”, dear friends in Christ: The Christian church at the Greek city of Corinth was just about as messed up as it could be. I’m sure you’ve heard about churches that suffer from a lot of internal conflict – perhaps you’ve had the sad experience of being part of one; but I’m sure none of them could begin to match the Corinthian church for the diversity and depth of its struggles. If you can think of a problem a church might have, they had it: personality conflicts, bitter rivalries between factions, doctrinal controversies, moral scandals, legal battles, worship wars ... the list goes on and on. Their pain, however, is our gain; because in writing to address their many and diverse troubles, St. Paul gives us what is essentially the divinely inspired handbook for resolving just about any problem a church could have. It’s preserved for us in his First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians.

For the past several Sundays we’ve been hearing portions of this divine manual for healing sick churches. You may remember a few weeks back when we heard how Paul was encouraging the people in the congregation to see themselves not as opponents in some kind of spiritual competition; but rather as fellow members of the body of Christ. It almost sounded like an anatomy lesson as the Apostle explained that just as a human body is composed of a number of parts, like eyes, ears, feet, and hands, each performing its own unique function for the good of the whole, so also in the church, each of us is called and equipped by God’s Holy Spirit to perform roles that serve for the common good. And while some roles may seem to be more glamorous or prestigious than others, the simple fact is that all are equally necessary. So there’s no place for feelings of superiority or jealousy or the extreme sort of individualism that says, “I can take care of myself and I don’t need anyone else.” Rather, recognizing and gladly accepting the role to which the Lord has called us, each of us should be seeking God’s gifts and empowerment to serve the others to the utmost of the ability he grants.

With this in mind, last week we heard Paul describe the one gift of God’s Spirit in which every Christian should be striving to excel: the gift of love. It’s the highest goal to which we can aspire. And, of course, he’s not talking about *love* in the sense that we often use the word when what we mean is a warm feeling of attraction or affection. No, when Paul speaks of love, he means the divine sort of love that Christ displayed when he gave himself as the sacrifice for our sins. It’s not a feeling; but rather a commitment to disregard self interest and devote oneself fully to the good of others. It’s the kind of love that Paul describes as patient and kind, not envious or boastful; not arrogant or rude. It’s a love that doesn’t insist on its own way; that isn’t irritable or resentful, or that keeps a record of wrongs. It’s a love that bears and endures all things in order to serve others. Just as Christ in love gave himself *to death* for us, Paul envisions Christians giving themselves continually *in life* for each other: always forgiving, always helping, always doing whatever is in our power to improve the physical and spiritual wellbeing of one another. And we need to understand that this sort of love is not something we can generate in ourselves; but it is a gift worked in us by God’s Holy Spirit who comes to us through the powerful Word of God, first to destroy our sinful selfishness and pride by the Law which condemns us, and then to fill us with faith and new life as he raises us again through the message of the forgiveness Jesus obtained for us by his passion, death, and resurrection. It’s experiencing God’s love in Christ and trusting in it that empowers us to love others.

Good. Following all this then, in today's lesson, Paul applies the principle of Christian love to what goes on when the congregation meets for worship. I mentioned before that the Corinthian church was messed up. In no area was this truer than its worship practices. They pretty much had the whole thing turned around. Instead of understanding their gathering for worship first and foremost as a time for receiving God's gifts, that is, for being strengthened and built up in holy faith by hearing God's Word and having it explained and applied to their lives, and for receiving God's assurance of forgiveness in the Lord's Supper – instead of all that – they saw their time of worship mostly as an opportunity to show off and impress one another with the gifts (spiritual and otherwise) that they'd already received. Or say it another way, instead of "Let's listen to what Jesus has to say so that together we can grow through his Word" it was each person vying to be the center of attention and saying "Ooh! Ooh! Look what I can do!"

And while this lamentable behavior took many forms, Paul specifically mentions the Corinthians' misuse of God's gift of speaking in tongues. This is an issue that confuses many Christians even today, so it will be good for us to spend a few moments unpacking exactly what it means. So first let's ask what is the gift of speaking in tongues and why did God grant it?

I'm sure you remember how on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples and gave them the ability to speak in languages they had never learned either through natural study or exposure. Why did God do this? Simple: there were Jews and converts to the Jewish faith from all over the known world in Jerusalem for the religious festival. And in order to speak directly to people's hearts in the languages they grew up in and to convey to them the saving message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Lord miraculously gave the disciples the ability to communicate perfectly in languages previously unknown to them. And so the miracle served two purposes: first to attract unbelievers to listen by causing them to wonder, "How'd you learn to speak like me?" And second to share Christ with those whose attention had thus been captured.

And let me tell you, whether it's miraculous or not, with regard to the first purpose it really works. You know this if you've ever been in a foreign country. You're walking through a crowd hearing people all around you speaking to one another in a language you don't know. It's all so much jibber-jabber to you. It's just noise. You can't focus on any of it. But if in all that jabbering you suddenly hear someone speaking in English, your ears pick up on it immediately and you turn your attention to the speaker. You can't help it. But imagine then discovering that the speaker isn't just talking; he's talking directly to you – through miraculous means, no less. Don't you think you'd listen to what he had to say? Of course you would – which is what made the gift of tongues a very effective witness in the spread of the Gospel.

Paul mentions that he had the gift himself. And that makes sense: he was appointed by Jesus to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. He traveled extensively. So the Spirit gave him the ability to talk to the people he encountered in their native tongues. It's apparent too that some members of the congregation at Corinth had the gift. That also makes sense: Corinth was a critical hub of sea traffic in the Mediterranean. Sailors, merchants, and travelers from all over the world, as well as a steady stream of Roman soldiers heading out to the provinces or back to Italy, were constantly passing through the city. What better place could there be for the Spirit to grant the gift of speaking other languages? The members of this church didn't have to go out into the world to spread the Gospel; the world was coming to them.

The trouble was, however, that some of the people in the congregation who had the gift of tongues were abusing it. When the church met for worship, they imagined that they were on stage. They'd ask to lead prayers or sing psalms – and then off they'd go in a language no one in the congregation understood. And of course, they did this not because they were particularly interested in praying or praising God; but mostly to impress the others with the gift they'd been given. It was a way to say, "See how spiritual I am?" So then, not to be outdone, others with the gift would get their turn. It's possible too that others, specifically Jews who had grown up in the synagogue system, would want to showcase their ability to pray and chant psalms that they'd memorized in Hebrew – a language no one spoke in conversation but that was used in Jewish worship – sort of like Latin is still used in some Roman Catholic churches. Why would they do this? Because in general Jewish Christians tended to think of themselves as being on a higher spiritual plane than Gentile Christians; and so the ability to use Hebrew was proof of their purer spiritual pedigree.

So, imagine what it would have been like to attend a worship service at Corinth. Parts of the service you could understand just fine, when everyone would be speaking in Greek, which was the common language of the day. But other parts – when the tongue speakers were doing their thing – you'd be sitting there staring at the ceiling waiting for them to finish. And while you might very well be impressed with their ability, hearing them wouldn't do you a lick of good even if they were praying the most magnificent prayers and declaring the wonders of God in Christ with exquisite elegance because you couldn't understand a word of what they were saying.

The whole thing was doubly damaging to the church. First because its primarily in the worship service that Christ gives us his gifts of grace through his Word – but that doesn't happen when you don't understand it; and second because the whole thing led to an escalation of sinful showmanship in which the focus of attention was on the merits of individual Christians rather than the merits of Christ. And you can understand how seeing all this going on, with certain members being exalted for their manifest spiritual gifts – how that would tempt and encourage others to jump into the competition to prove to the everyone else how spiritual they were too. So for most of the members of the church attending worship was sort of like going to the hospital to be treated for some ailment; but instead of being cured, you end up catching some other deadly disease from exposure to the other patients.

What Paul is saying to the church in this morning's Epistle reading is, in a nutshell, "Knock it off. You're acting like a bunch of children arguing about who's got the smartest dog. It's time to grow up and act like spiritual adults. The gifts of the Spirit are to be used for the building up of the whole church; not for the glory of the person who has the gift. If you've got the gift of speaking in tongues, wonderful. Use it for what it's for: telling unbelievers who have a foreign mother tongue about Christ in a way that they can understand. But in the church, if you have something to say, or a prayer, or a psalm, say it in a way that everyone can understand. That way everyone will benefit and the whole body of Christ will be strengthened."

Now, I suppose this simple lesson is intuitively obvious to us. And, at least to the best of my knowledge, while some of you may be conversant in another language that you studied, we don't have anyone in the congregation who has the *supernatural* gift of speaking in other tongues. So it may appear that this text doesn't have much direct application to us. Maybe so; but I do think we can apply to ourselves the general principle.

What I mean is this: we've all been given gifts by God. We've got people with musical talents, organizational skills, teaching abilities, and eye for art and design; others have trade skills and an understanding of technical things that baffle the rest of us. Some of you have great people skills and know how to make visitors feel welcome or what to say when calling upon someone who's sick; others have deep insights into biblical truths; and still others are very empathetic – you know what people are feeling and what's weighing on them and so you know how to pray with and for them. I could go on; but I'm sure you get the idea even if I haven't mentioned your own particular gifts. The point is that the Lord has given them to you so that you can put them to use in the service of the church—not to bring glory to yourself, which would be an abuse of the gift; but for the glory of God, the building up of his kingdom, and the strengthening of your brothers and sisters in Christ.

We see this played out too in some of our worship practices. Just for example, in our churches we normally put the musicians and the choir either to the rear or off to the side of the worshipping assembly. Why? It's to emphasize that they aren't there to perform for the congregation and call attention to themselves; but rather they're there to support the congregation's worship and enhance the delivery of God's message. This is also why in our churches the congregation tends to be fairly passive throughout the service. Think of Mary sitting at Jesus' feet and listening as opposed to Martha who was working like crazy to impress Jesus with her skills as a hostess. Mary was the one Jesus commended for choosing the right way to attend him. Now someone may say, "Well what about you with the white robe and doing all the talking? Don't tell me that's not all designed to draw attention to yourself." Actually, it's not; though sometimes it's wrongly interpreted that way. The truth is that *all* of our pastors wear a white robe for the same reason that a judge in a courtroom wears a black one, which is to communicate the idea that it's not about the man who holds the office, it's about the authority of the office itself. I wear a robe during worship to say "It's not about me. It's about the Christ I proclaim to you." It's meant to say, "A pastor is a pastor is a pastor. What you should be paying attention to is the message – the Word of Christ and his forgiveness that the pastor proclaims." That's not to say that there aren't pastors who abuse the position that the Spirit has placed them in to draw attention to themselves. It's a temptation that goes with the office – I know it only too well. Fortunately, I have all of you to keep me humble, and my dear wife to finish the job should you fail on any particular Sunday.

In summary then, today's Scripture stresses that none of us should be abusing the gifts the Spirit gives by using them for self promotion or to prove to ourselves and to others that we're better or more spiritual than they are. Nor, I should add, are we to abuse the Spirit's gifts by neglecting to put them to work as is often the case. Instead, in Christian love, we should gladly and willingly employ the gifts we've been given to help, support, strengthen, and encourage one another on our sojourn here below so that we all together make it safely to the goal. For our past failures, we ask Christ's forgiveness. And receiving his Word of grace, let's push on resolved to avoid the errors of the tongue tangled and highly competitive Corinthians. May God help us to do it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***