

United

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

January 22, 2023

First Presbyterian, Luling

First, I have a two different grocery store tales for you. The first grocery store story occurred in our beloved HEB, this one on the east side of San Antonio, about 20 years ago. When I served a church downtown, I frequently would stop by this small HEB to pick up something for my lunch—a salad, some fruit, anything else that looked better than what I had at home. The east side of San Antonio was beginning to change, even then, but it has historically been the section of town where mostly Black people lived. The customers at the store were mostly Black and Hispanic, and then there was me. On this day that I'm remembering, the cashier was also Black. There was an elderly Black woman three people ahead of me in line. He greeted her respectfully, checked her out, and sent the sacker out to help her with her groceries. Next up was a Hispanic man. Without pausing, the cashier switched to Spanish, greeted him, made small talk about the weather, checked him out and sent him on his way. Right in front of me was a younger Black man, clearly well known to the cashier. They switched into their most comfortable conversation mode and visited about their lives as he checked out. Then it was my turn, and the cashier again switched into a very polite and professional mode as he greeted me. It was nothing short of amazing, how he could make each person feel welcome and comfortable, all within the space of five minutes. I imagine it was also exhausting by the end of the day, but as HEB always manages to do, each customer was served with courtesy and kindness.

The second grocery store story is one I've been saving for a sermon, but I wasn't expecting it to be this sermon. It's a grocery chain in the Netherlands called Jumbo. They recently created "Slow Lanes" for their checkout areas. Some people, especially those who live alone and are lonely, want to chit chat as they check out their groceries. So this Jumbo store made special lanes for slow checkouts that include visiting between cashier and customer. At first I really liked this idea and thought it was kind and sweet and caring, and I was going to use it in some sermon about how we all need to slow down and treat each other like human beings. But then it struck me as such a contrast to that other grocery store experience that I had. Yes, it's kind to look out for lonely people in this way, but have we gotten so demanding of having our own way, having things go exactly the way we want them to all the time, that we have to separate ourselves out

into fast checker outers and slow checker outers? I admit that I would never ever choose a slow check out lane and I have definitely been known to get impatient with chatty customers in line. But really? We can't even allow a few extra minutes for people to buy their groceries differently than we do and need to create a separate lane for them?

A tale of two grocery stores. Both serve all their customers. The first serves them together. Some are minorly inconvenienced. The second serves them separately. I promise there's going to be a connection, just hang on to the two grocery stores for a minute.

The Corinthians, we heard last week, lived in quite the cosmopolitan city, with lots of different kinds of people and lots of transience, and lots of discussion of all kinds of ideas. In theory, they were accustomed to interacting and conversing with all kinds of folks and presumably had figured out how to live together peaceably in Corinth. However, Paul's very first topic, immediately after that paragraph of thanksgiving from last week, is this: there are divisions among the Corinthian Christians. There can't have been very many of them at this point. One commentator says we're talking dozens of people, not hundreds.¹ Even so, they've divided themselves up, based on which of their leaders they identify with or agree with or were baptized by. It's not entirely clear what the basis of their division is. Some are saying they belong to Paul. Some are saying they belong to Peter or Cephas—that's two different translations of Peter's name, so the same person. Some are saying they belong to Apollos. And some are saying they belong to Christ. And the people who told Paul about this he calls "Chloe's people," and no one really seems to know exactly what that means, except Chloe's people could be yet another faction.

Well. Paul finds this offensive. He doesn't want to have people following *him* he wants them to be following Jesus. He has nothing against Apollos or Peter, but people belong to Christ, not to mere human leaders. They were all baptized with the same baptism, even if it was administered by different people, and that means they should all be one in Christ. He calls them to be one in Christ, of the same mind.

Church people, creating divisions where none need to be. Have you ever heard of such a thing? Well, yes, of course. Church people—Christians—have been known to leave congregations over sanctuary renovations, new pastors, old pastors, masks or no masks, screens or no screens, hymnals, the songs we sing,

¹ Mary Hinkle Shore, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-1-corinthians-110-18-4>

the songs we don't sing, and the coffee after worship. We are really good at creating divisions and disagreements, though I'm sure none of us here have ever done such a thing. I'm sure we have, actually. But I'm also sure that we also work hard to move past petty disagreements, because we know our unity in Christ is more important. That's one of our gifts as a congregation.

It's easy to see how Apollos's people and Chloe's people and Peter's and Paul's continued to divide themselves and become denominations and breakaway denominations and now just look at the church in all its chopped up pieces. How can we claim to be united when we are so clearly divided?

Our culture pulls us toward division, and it's a strong pull. Our culture, sometimes with good intentions, pulls us toward separate grocery lines, just so we won't be inconvenienced for the sake of our neighbor's mental and emotional well being. The church's calling, in grocery store terms, is to come together in one check out line, where each person is valued and welcomed, where each person gets what they need, even if it means someone else has to sacrifice.

We belong to Christ. We proclaim Christ. All else is secondary. Our preferences, our worship experiences, our favorite leaders, our political allegiances, our convictions that we are very sure are the right beliefs. All of that is secondary to belonging to Christ, who called us to be one. Sometimes we sacrifice one of these lesser things for a time in order to preserve unity. And sometimes someone else is called to sacrifice one of these lesser things. It's not an easy thing. Separation and division are much easier and more comfortable.

I doubt you've been informed of this, but this is also the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, providentially. So I close with a prayer written for that occasion this year: Gracious and loving God, Expand our vision that we might see the mission we share with all of our Christian brothers and sisters, to show forth the justice and loving kindness of your kingdom. Help us to welcome our neighbors as your Son welcomed us. Help us to be more generous as we witness to the grace that you freely give us. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.²

² <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/2023-WPCU-ENG.pdf>