

CHLOE IN THE AFTERNOON

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Grace Church in New York
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For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. (1 Corinthians 1:11)

Today's reading from 1st Corinthians reminds me of some church drama that occurred long ago. I was about twelve at the time, and proud to be a new acolyte. A young married couple who sang in the choir were the leaders of the group. They made being an acolyte fun. They combined training sessions with pizza parties, yet conveyed that serving at the altar was a ministry. It was important. We looked up to them, and we wanted to do well. We wanted to carry the processional cross straight and true, keep the processional torches at the same level, and on a good day even walk in step.

One year the honor of being the lead crucifer at the midnight Christmas Eve service fell to me. What is more, the service was to be broadcast on the radio. It didn't dawn on me that no one listening to the radio would be able to tell who was carrying the cross. Somehow they would know. It was a big deal. We were all going to be famous. I was going to be famous. The folks from the radio station stretched a wire across the chancel and hung a microphone from it. My only instruction: don't hit the mic when you go by it with the cross. What can I say? On Christmas Eve I was caught up in the moment. I was in the zone until I heard the crash of metal on metal as the ornate bronze cross slammed into the mic and got stuck in the wire. One can only guess what the listening public heard as I tried to extricate the cross.

Not surprisingly, I took a good bit of ribbing from the other acolytes. One suggested I be assigned a requisite number of push-ups for penance. We all laughed, and it became a standing joke that future acolyte blunders would result in push-ups. Of course, no one ever did a single push-up. It was all in jest. Sadly, a woman on the vestry named Donna was not known for her sense of humor. Donna caught partial wind of push-ups and decided to take matters into her own hands. She phoned the parents of every acolyte and asked them if they knew what was happening. Mind you now, she didn't call my parents, because my father was the rector. Only after she had compiled a trove of anecdotal evidence did she demand a meeting with my father and the acolyte leaders. The whole thing was soon shown to be the non-issue that it was, but not before the young couple, out of frustration, stepped down from their position. I remember it all still today because from that point on, it just wasn't as much fun to be an acolyte anymore. Most troubling of all, when the dust settled Donna thought she had done really great work. *Onward, Christian soldier!*

In today's reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, we encounter some church drama that occurred long ago. The time was the mid-first century, when the Christian movement was hardly even a few decades old. The place was in Greece, specifically the city of Corinth, a vibrant commercial and religious hub between Athens and Sparta. Paul had founded the Corinthian congregation just a few years earlier on his first missionary journey, and maintained frequent contact with them. Other Christian leaders also would preach and teach at the Corinthian church as they passed through the city on their travels to tell the world about Jesus. The gospel was all very new, and everyone was eager to hear more and gain new perspectives.

Over time the visiting preachers made their mark on the congregation, some more so than others. Soon various theological factions, wrapped up in the personalities, began roiling the membership. We heard Paul address the dissension today: *What I mean is that each of you says, "I*

belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” We don’t know for sure what was behind each of the factions, but we can make educated guesses. Those who said, “I belong to Paul” were likely the Gentile Christians – the non-Jewish contingent. Christians were still trying to figure out who they were in relation to the Jews. Jesus had been a Jew. Paul himself was a Jew. Now Paul was declaring himself to be the apostle to the gentiles. His novel message was that anyone could become a Christian without first becoming a Jew. Jesus had fulfilled the Law and the Prophets, and now salvation came by God’s grace, through faith in Christ.

What of the other factions? Those who said, “I belong to Cephas” were probably on the opposite end of the spectrum from those who said, “I belong to Paul.” Cephas is the Greek name for Peter. Peter was well known as the closest associate of Jesus during the Galilean ministry, and he had emerged as a leader, if not the leader, of the church. It’s probably pushing it to say that Peter and Paul were rivals, but not by much. Peter thought that the church should stay anchored in its Jewish identity, not tone it down in an effort to reach a non-Jewish world. So those who said “I belong to Cephas” were probably the Jewish Christians. The nature of the other two factions is harder to guess. Those who said “I belong to Apollos” might have been the intellectuals interested in Greek philosophy. Those who said “I belong to Christ” might have been of the sort known for bringing down the hammer, declaring their own thoughts to be perfectly in line with Jesus’ thoughts. What they really might have meant was, “Christ belongs to me.”

So it is that the Corinthian congregation was riven by party strife. I belong to Paul, or Peter, or Apollos, or Christ. Imagine the drama and dissension. It’s all very interesting, but about this passage I have one overriding question that stands apart from all the factions. My question is this: Who the devil is Chloe? If you recall, St. Paul wrote: *For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.* So I ask again: Who the devil is Chloe? I don’t use the word “devil” lightly here because the first image that comes to mind is Dana Carvey’s comic character that he used to portray on Saturday Night Live, “The Church Lady.” The church lady’s actual name was supposed to be Enid Strict, and she made it her business to pronounce judgement on everyone else’s business.

Could it be that Chloe was like Donna, the killer of joy and spoiler of an acolyte ministry? Could it be that Chloe was the Enid Strict – even the Church Lady – of the Corinthian congregation? Consider: Chloe had people – people who might have said, “I belong to Chloe.” You heard St. Paul acknowledge their influence, and even he seemed to tremble before the wishes of Chloe and her people. If you wanted to be anyone in the Corinthian congregation, you would have to make nice with Chloe and her people, the real power brokers of the church. Your sign of arrival would be an invitation to lunch with Chloe in the afternoon. Perhaps between courses you would discuss the drama and dissension in the church, and even plot more. Chloe seemed to be right in the thick of it, triangulating between factions and sending her people off to inform Paul. It’s not a pretty picture of Christian community.

In this line of thought, we might ask what would be Chloe’s legacy? How would her epitaph read? In his great work, The Shape of the Liturgy, the liturgical scholar Gregory Dix writes of an early Christian tombstone that reads: *Here sleeps the blessed Chione who has found Jerusalem, for she prayed much.* Dix writes that not another thing is known about Chione, but what a lovely thing it was that those who witnessed her life were sure of two things: She found Jerusalem, for she prayed much. I know someone else who wants her epitaph to be: *She loved her family. She got stuff done.* As for Chloe, well, not another word is known about her either. The New Testament never again mentions her. But perhaps her epitaph would be: *She had people. She pried in others’ business.*

Of course, I’m being unfair to Chloe. Mark it off as my overly active imagination, seasoned by a lifetime in the weeds of church dynamics and dysfunction. A second, different picture of Chloe can just as easily emerge as the first. The second picture is not of Chloe the Church Lady, but Chloe

the church leader. Chloe the gracious, generous, responsible Christian leader. Chloe's people were more likely to be her household staff than they were her network of spies. If she had a household staff, it suggests she was a person of means. That she had a direct line to Paul implies she was a principal figure – if not the principal figure in the congregation. In fact, her home may have been where the Corinthian Christians met. In those days, churches didn't have buildings of their own, set apart solely for worship and fellowship. They gathered in the homes of those who had space ample enough to accommodate them. Such members would have been few. Chloe would have been one of them, perhaps the only one, graciously, generously opening her home week after week for the growth of the kingdom. Chloe in the afternoon was up to good things, not devilish things.

Then the disagreements emerged, as disagreements would always emerge in the church. In the centuries to come Christians would wage pitched, internal battles about everything from the nature of Christ, to candles, to vestments, to Prayer Books. Who can be married? Who can be ordained? What is the proper engagement of the church with politics? What is the proper Sunday worship service: Morning Prayer or the Eucharist? When I first graduated from seminary I went to serve as the curate of a large Midwestern parish. I was bemused to learn that the membership was involved in a fierce debate over liturgical furniture. For the Eucharist the rector wanted to use a freestanding table at the chancel steps. Meanwhile most of the members – including the founding family who had built the place – wondered why, on earth, we wouldn't use the east-facing high altar, which was exactly where God and the architect told them to put it. “The rector may belong to Paul, but we belong to Christ,” is what they implied. One Sunday the rector dared to dignify the freestanding table with candles. After the service one of the founding members came by the clergy vesting room, and with pointed words said, “Don't think I didn't notice those candles. This isn't over by a long shot!” *Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love!*

One thing that we can say for church arguments is that they are signs of life. They are conducted by stakeholders who care passionately for the mission. The Corinthian Christians cared so much about what the gospel meant that they dared to argue about it. But when the drama and dissention got out of hand, Chloe rightly appealed to Paul. Paul took the opportunity to write the letter we know as 1st Corinthians – only a snippet of which we heard today. Paul reminded the Corinthians of what came first in their life together, and what should follow after. What came first was the cross of Christ – the good news that God in Christ had forgiven the sins of the whole world. They could and should all find their unity at the foot of the cross, as forgiven sinners who trust in the grace of God.

The letter contains much more than we heard today. Paul would go on to write soaring and convincing rhetoric about the resurrection of Jesus (ch. 15). And in one passage that can only be described as humorous, Paul chided some members of the Corinthian congregation (11:33-34). Why? They were apparently arriving at Chloe's house way early for the worship service, and drinking the wine for the Eucharist before the other arrived. “Wait for one another,” declared Paul. None of this would we have had Chloe not sent her people to Paul for help and clarification about life together as the people of God. In this line we might reimagine Chloe's epitaph, even though, like Chione, we don't know another thing about her: *Here sleeps the blessed Chloe. She has found Jerusalem for she cared much.*

That rector of the church where I began my ordained ministry used to start every sermon with the following prayer. As he would begin, today so shall we end:

O God, grant us a right perception between that which comes first in our lives and that which follows after. And when we would make much of that which cannot matter much to you, restore us to our right profession and perspective, which is Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.