A couple of weeks ago when I was visiting Myrtle at the hospital, somebody from the hospital staff randomly came up and asked me a series of questions. I think because she knew I’m the pastor from Myrtle’s church and I’ve served as the chaplain in that very same hospital a few years ago. This lady asked me, “*What’s the difference between a Presbyterian and a Catholic?”* Well, that kind of caught me by surprise, as I wasn’t expected to give a presentation about the differences in various religious denominations.

That hospital staff went on to ask me more questions. “*Do you guys read the same Bible and follow Jesus? Do you wear the crucifix and recite the Lord’s Prayer, say the ‘Hail! Mary’? Do you believe and worship the saints and Mary – the mother of Jesus?”* And last but not least, “*How come there are so many Christian denominations? What’s the difference? Aren’t we all Christians?”*

My response to her was, “*Yes and No! Yes, we still read and believe the same Bible (although the Catholic bible has some additional books in there). Yes, we still believe in the same Jesus and recite the same Lord’s Prayer. No, we do not recite the “Hail! Mary!” and honor all the saints the same way as the Catholics do. Our Protestant crosses are different from the Catholic ones. We don’t have Jesus hanging on the cross because we believe the empty cross symbolizes Christ’s resurrection and the cross and the tomb are not His final resting place.”*  What began as a casual conversation turned into a somewhat in-depth theological discussion with that hospital staff. Without going into the nitty-gritty details about what makes Presbyterian different from any other Christian faith, I offered that person a general overview of how our polity (that is, the way our governing bodies and structure work) are different and that there are some differences in terms of our understanding when it comes to certain theological doctrines and perspectives.

Some denomination may place more emphasis in certain doctrines over the other. Some may have differences in the way we celebrate our communion or the mean of sharing the gospel and witnessing God’s love to others. But overall, we are ALL baptized in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, and that Christ has resurrected from the death for the remission of our sins. We have been saved through God’s lavished grace and unconditional love through Christ. This is the core of the gospel! Yes, we can all call ourselves “Christians”, when we place our common trust and faith in Christ. All of us are part of the same big God’s family.

Unfortunately many people don’t quite see it that way. Many churches nowadays are undergoing series of mitosis…that is division and splitting from the body. They split because of philosophical and personnel differences among the leaderships and their approach in ministry. Even Presbyterians alone over the years, have undergone series of mergers and divergences, severely jeopardizing the harmony and the unity of the body.

Division among the body isn’t anything new. What happened now in 2014, also happened some 2,000 years ago with the early church, as we read earlier in our first passage. The early church in Corinth was a very diverse and lively community that was undergoing a bit of a struggle in getting along with one another. There seemed to be tensions and differences in opinions among those who “have” and those who “have-not”; those who are more educated and those who are less; those who are Jews and those who are Gentiles, which brings along various cultural customs and rituals differences.

Whenever you have a diverse group of people together, chances are you’re bound to have differences in opinion and how they prefer things. Yet despite all of that, they all claim their common allegiance in Christ. Some say we should do this, while other say we should do that. Some say *“I belong to Paul or Cephas or Apollo”* and some simply say *“I belong to Christ”.*

Not much have changed over the past 2,000 years, we still find ourselves drawing lines on the sand along our broad theological spectrum, yet we all claim to be faithful followers of Christ and believers of the same God. We all read the same Bible, but we just read it and understand it differently. We’ve put up divisions among our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ based on our personal preferences while expecting others to share our views. We’ve exhausted our energy and resources in defending our positions. We’ve stressed our differences rather than what we have shared in common. Somehow I have a feeling that that’s not what God has envisioned for us – the Body of Christ. The truth of the matter is, as Christians, **we are all called to be in communion and relationship with one another**, even when we have our own share of differences. We are all sinners in God’s eyes and we’re in need of God’s grace and redemption. *“For we are all sinners and have fallen short of God’s glory.”*

Part of our challenges and our callings as the Body of Christ (the Church) is to **celebrate our diversity and our differences in the unity of the Spirit** – to see things through the lens of the others rather than exclusively of our own.

In spite of our difference, Christ has called each of us to embark on a common mission journey to share and to proclaim the gospel. We must strive towards a common goal and a purpose. As the Apostle Paul referred to in our 1st passage today, ***“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.”[[1]](#footnote-1)***

In other word, we are empowered by our belief and faith in Christ, not by our own eloquence and personal wisdom but by proclaiming the gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection on the cross. Ultimately the source of our strength comes from Christ and not from ourselves.

**We are all on the same team, having the same mind and mission for Christ, for God’s glory and not ours**….which leads us to the gospel lesson that we read earlier from Matthew.

In our Gospel lesson today, we saw that Jesus was about to launch his earthly ministry, right after his baptism and had learn that John had been arrested. But Jesus did not want to do this all by Himself. He needed to develop and empower a supporting cast in order to carry out this team ministry.

Many of these disciples came from various backgrounds. They did not come from the social elites, the most educated, or the wealthiest families. Some were even social misfits and most hated, such as a tax-collector as in Matthew - the writer of our gospel lesson today. Nevertheless, **God did not look upon their abilities but rather their availabilities.** They did not have any theological training whatsoever, all they knew about life was fishing, but they were willing to commit at all causes in order to follow Jesus.

As we read, some left their entire livelihood, their boats and their nets, their whole family and their future behind in order to take on this road that is less traveled. They had put everything on the line in order to follow Christ. The disciples’ commitment was a step above and **“beyond their calling”. When Jesus called, they responded.** Instead of fishing for fishes, they were now fishing for people.

Furthermore, many of them carry different personalities, skills and talents. Certainly not all twelve of them would agree on every decision that needs to be made. As they spent more time together perhaps they didn’t see things eye-to-eye or get on each other’s nerves, but that’s human-nature and that’s part of our challenges in recognizing our differences and honoring our common calling through Christ.

Just like those first disciples, all of us are called to live in relationship with one another and in communion with Christ. In spite of our differences, **we must put our individual egos and personal agenda aside, for the sake of upbuilding the body of Christ (the Church) with a common goal, vision, and purpose.**

This is a pretty tall order that requires lots of grace and humility. It invites all of us to take a step back and to look at the larger picture, not from our perspective but from God’s perspective! It requires us to listen to one another more attentively and pay closer attention to the other person’s needs. Tensions and differences lead to an open door for grace and mutual understanding. This portrait or story of God’s human salvation calls for our undivided commitment that is above and beyond.

**Each day we strive to build bridges across our social and spiritual divides, not only among our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ but with those of other faiths and even non-faith.** They too are part of God’s Kingdom and we are all God’s children. **This special calling of grace and compassion is certainly above and beyond, but it is also gratifying and rewarding! This is beyond just saying “Yes” to Christ! It is beyond our baptism, it is about proclaim the gospel!**

As the Apostle Paul reminded us that, “*for God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. 26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Friends, we are standing at a cross-road and in an “in-between” time. Christ has come and Christ will come again soon as He has promised. There are as many people out there who are in need of God’s grace and are in a state of denial or oblivion. Many of them are still lost in the dark in search for the light of Christ to come into their lives. Many believe in no supreme higher power, or anyone else but themselves….and we pray for these individuals that someday they too may recognize God’s presence that is already at work in their lives.

May the Epiphany light of Christ continue to shine upon us, illuminate us and direct the paths in which we should walk and to guide others. May the Holy Spirit help us to discern our everyday calling as Disciples of Christ. Enable us to overcome barriers and our personal fears in order to build bridges wherever we may be, as we strive to serve as “ambassadors for Christ” with grace, compassion and imagination. **May God continue to lead us and challenge us in new mission adventures that are above and beyond our callings.** In the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *I Corinthians 1:17* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *I Corinthians 1:25-29* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)