

The Run-Flat Church

Sunday, November 10, 2019

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

In March 2013, Duke University lowered the flags on its campus to note the passing of longtime chemistry professor, James Bonk, who died at age 82. Bonk taught at Duke for 53 years. In reporting his death, the school's paper, *Duke Today*, mentioned that over the years, Bonk instructed over 30,000 students and that those students called his general chemistry classes "Bonkistry." The article paid tribute to Bonk for his teaching accomplishments and other contributions to life on campus, including building up the tennis team, but added that he was "perhaps most notorious for the flat tire story."

As the story goes, four of Bonk's chemistry students took a road trip the weekend before the final exam. They arrived back on Monday in time for the exam, but because of their alcohol consumption over the weekend, they were in no fit state to sit the exam. The students approached Bonk, telling him they had gotten a flat tire on their trip, and having no spare, could not get back in time to study for the exam. They asked to take the test later. Bonk seemed skeptical of their story but agreed to accommodate their request.

When the test day came, Bonk put the students in four separate rooms and gave them their exams. They looked at the first problem, which was something simple about free radical formation and worth five points. "Cool," they thought, "this is going to be easy." They quickly did that problem and turned the page. They were unprepared, however, for the second question, which was worth 95 points. The question was simply this: "Which tire?" The students failed to consider this question when concocting their story. Their answers differed and all four failed the exam.

It's a great story! But we won't be able to use this story much longer. In the not-too-distant future, drivers won't appreciate this story because new cars won't have spare tires. Car makers are removing spare tires in order to save money and to reduce vehicle weight to meet increasingly tightened federal mileage standards. Already today, approximately 28 percent of new cars have no spare tire and that percentage will only go up.

Of course, that doesn't mean we'll never have flat tires, but many new cars now come equipped with run-flat tires. These specially constructed tires can suffer a puncture and

loss of air, but still perform well enough for motorists to keep driving and get to a tire shop. This can be especially helpful if the puncture occurs in an inconvenient or dangerous location, or if the driver is unable to change a tire. Run-flat tires are a great benefit for drivers, but at best, they are a temporary solution. Most run-flat tires have their limitations: they can only be used for about 50 miles and only at less than 50 miles per hour. Given those restrictions, a run-flat tire is a pretty good metaphor for a congregation suffering internal conflict. It may keep rolling for a while, but its range is limited and without a more permanent fix, it will eventually give out.

Paul's letter suggests the Corinthian church has a tire problem. The congregation is a run-flat church, already punctured, but not quite at a stop. The "nail" causing this puncture is factionalism. The congregation split into personality cliques, each claiming partiality for a different preacher, some for Paul, some for Apollos, and some for Peter. One faction claimed to be following Jesus himself, although what they meant by that is not clear, and, in making this assertion, they only deepened the fractured atmosphere in the church.

There is not the slightest suggestion that Paul, Apollos or Peter encouraged such splintering or that they desired such a cult of admirers. But suddenly the Corinthian church is in emergency mode, running flat and needing to get to a "tire shop" soon. Paul, the figurative garage mechanic, wrote pleading for everyone in the Corinthian church to "*be in agreement*," to have "*no divisions*" among them and to "*be united in the same mind and the same purpose*" (v. 10). Ever met a church like that? A church without disagreement or division, where everyone is always on the same page? Me neither! Paul may be asking too much of this (or any) congregation. In fact, we may fairly ask, "Is agreement possible in *any* group these days?" The lack of civility these days would tend to make such harmonious agreement unlikely. Congregations, like every other group, have personalities. We are a congregation of varying personalities with individual preferences, and no two of us are at the same point in our spiritual journey.

This was the case in Corinth, too. Paul lived and worked in Corinth for some time. He knew these people intimately and knew about their spiritual immaturity. Further on in this letter, he refers to this when he says, "*brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food.*" He then adds, "*Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you,*

are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, 'I belong to Paul,' and another, 'I belong to Apollos,' are you not merely human?" (3:1-4). Merely human! Aren't we all merely human? The Corinthian congregants knew Jesus Christ, but because their human failings dominated their faith, they did not yet fully obey the Spirit of God. This kept them divided.

In congregations experiencing infighting, it is not uncommon to find that spiritual immaturity is a contributing factor. This can be a high hurdle for a congregation to overcome. As attendance at worship and Sunday school drops, and as biblical illiteracy increases, people are less aware of God's presence and claim on their life, of the Christ-like nature of faithful living, and of the Spirit's transforming power available to those who believe. The good news is that we can foster spiritual maturity in one another; in fact, as churches, we have a calling to breathe fresh air into the flat tires of faith.

Spiritual maturity or spiritual re-inflation is hard, ongoing work. The first marker on the road to spiritual maturity is recognizing that only Jesus is flawless, and that the church is always a work in progress. Regardless of our chronological ages, some of us may still be infants in Christ. In fact, it is possible that a few of us will get stuck in that stage. But as individual members and as a whole church, we ought to be working to improve how we reflect God's love, both to those outside the congregation and to each other.

Remember that the road to spiritual maturity is intended primarily for carpools, vans, and buses, and not for single-occupant vehicles. Each of us should be the recipient of spiritual nourishment from others and the donor of spiritual encouragement to others. We talk together about what God is doing in our lives, we share our struggles, and we testify to spiritual insights and victories. Prayer times in worship should be filled with requests on behalf of people who are sick or hospitalized, and they ought to include petitions for our own struggles as we seek to mirror God's grace.

In a church that's running on four good tires, there will be no spiritual elitism, no sense of "My spirituality is deeper than your spirituality." Some souls may have much to learn about discipleship, but there ought to be an accompanying humble willingness to support that member with prayer and encouragement, perhaps even advice, if the other member seeks it. All of this can be offered while recognizing the other person as a fellow traveler on the faith journey. No one should ever say, "My faith, my doctrine, my social

justice views, my sense of mission, my moral uprightness or my political affiliation make me a better Christian than you." Instead, the message must always be, "We are in this together as we seek to follow Jesus Christ."

In verse 18, Paul says: *"For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."* It's the last verse of our reading, but it is really the lead sentence of a section where Paul provides a remedy for the run-flat situation in the Corinthian church. *"We proclaim Christ crucified,"* he says (v. 23), and he adds, *"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord"* (v. 31). In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson makes this even plainer by rendering this verse as, "If you're going to blow a horn, blow a trumpet for God." Later still, Paul says that Christians should *"have the mind of Christ"* (2:16). Christ is our model. He is the One we seek to emulate in our dealings with one another on behalf of the world.

We don't want to be like those four students trying to shirk their responsibilities after a weekend of partying. Truth is, if they had gotten their stories right and held together, they might have pulled off their little deception. The church has its sights on far loftier goals: nothing less than the restoration of creation, fair provision and God's justice for all people, and the attainment of real and lasting peace. Such goals oblige us to remember that we are personally and corporately works-in-progress; to drive together in the carpool lane; to avoid spiritual elitism; and to model the life and values of Jesus. These things are the primary tools in the Lord's tire shop, so that we can get back on the road together, heading in the right direction.

Prayer: Uniting God, I pray that You will help every member of Federated Church to live in harmony with each other. May we be united in a love like yours! Enable us to pray with the mind of Christ, to be guided by Your Spirit, and to glorify You with one heart and mind and voice. Keep us from worldly ways, but rather may our lives be a witness of Your love, not only in what we say, but in all that we do. I ask this for the sake of Jesus Christ, Amen.

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