January 22, 2017
Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Isa 8:23-9:3
Ps 27:1, 4, 13-14
1 Cor 1:10-13, 17
Matt 4:12-230

By Dianne Bergant, CSA

At the core of most of the injustice on the world is a sense of superiority. ‘I am better than you because of my gender, my racial or ethnic origin, my political or economic standing, etc.’ Almost any personal characteristic can become the reason for discrimination of others. An example of this kind of arrogant bias is depicted in today’s second reading. Having heard of serious dissensions (schismata) among them, Paul writes a strong rebuke to the Corinthian community. Their specific claims of preeminence were based on the loyalties to various religious leaders. Since the community traced its origin to the teachings of Paul, some thought that aligning themselves with him gave them an edge over others. Apollos was a brilliant Jewish convert from Alexandria, Egypt, whose knowledge of the Scriptures was exceptional. Others felt that standing in the light of his glory enhanced their own position in the community. Mention of the Aramaic name Cephas rather than the Greek name Peter, suggests that some in the community were either Palestinian Jewish Christians with loyalties to the apostle himself or to the form of Christian living preferred by that group. Finally, there were those who considered themselves ally of no leader, no particular group within the community of believers. They needed no intermediary; they aligned themselves directly with Christ.

It might all seem petty to us today. However, there is very little difference between what we see in the Corinthian community and what one sometimes hears today: ‘I am a John Paul II Christian;’ or ‘I am a Pope Francis Christian.’ In the face of this, Paul’s words are as appropriate today as they were when first spoken: “Is Christ divided?”

Unity in the community does not mean uniformity. There will of course be differences of opinion, different theological understandings. However, these differences cannot set up categories of ‘inferior’ and ‘superior.’ One can presume that Paul, Apollos, and Peter each interpreted the teachings of Jesus differently, and handed down their interpretation to their followers. But should such diversity divide the community? If there was to be harmony within this diversity, the members of the community would have to work through their differences with respect and openness. Only then would they be able to present a fitting witness of the reign of God to the broader world.

It is not too hard for those of us committed to issues of justice to recognize certain gender, racial, ethnic, religious, economic, political etc. biases. However, it is not so easy to recognize and deal with biases that stem from theological differences. In such
cases it is easy to judge the ‘others’ as lacking in insight, being rigid in their positions and ignorant of the real truth. Such evaluation could well be accurate. However, do our own theological stands or insights make us superior to others? Furthermore, are we always so sure that we are right? Is it possible that another point of view, one that is more progressive or more traditional, could clarify or enrich our own position?

Is it possible that doctrinaire rises out of a sense of theological insecurity? As ministers we are responsible for handing the tradition down to the people of God. Don’t we have to be sure of what we are saying and doing? Yes, to a certain extent that is true. But Anselm defines theology as “faith seeking understanding.” “Seeking understanding,” not possessing it fully. If we cannot learn something from the seeking of others, then, perhaps, we have indeed divided Christ.

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