

## *“The Problem of Entropy”*

*Psalm 3:1-8; I Corinthians 12:12-27*

August 8, 2021

As most of you likely already know, I wasn't always a pastor. Before I felt the call to ministry, I worked in the restaurant industry as a cook and then as a chef. And while I ended up in that profession somewhat as a matter of happenstance, I did really enjoy it. It wasn't the actual work which led me away from commercial kitchens, rather the hours. Something about always coming home after midnight just wasn't good for my soul.

But I will tell you, I still love being in a kitchen. But working at home to cook meals, while enjoyable, is by no means nearly as fun as working in restaurant kitchen can be. I remember one night at the Lamp Lighter in particular.

It was already going to be a busy night. During the Christmas season, we had lots of diners PLUS a ton of corporate banquets upstairs in the restaurant. Then, when we arrived to work, we discovered some troubling news. The reservations staff had booked an extra party of 50 without telling us. Now, not only were we booked out, we had 50 extra folks coming for dinner.

Long story short, we made it through but it took everything we had. No kidding, when that night ended, I probably looked like the chef-equivalent of a soldier coming off the front lines. But we had so much fun.

We were like a intricately designed machine, turning and scooping, flipping and frying. Each person did their job flawlessly. When you got a clear order board, you just knew that someone else was getting slammed, so you tried to help them until your orders started rolling in.

It was a fun night. Triumphant, really. When we left on that cold December night, we were tired but content. We had met the challenge and triumphed.

There were other nights, to be sure, that were quite different. Nights when matters didn't progress so smoothly. Some nights, even though staffing levels are right and you've got everything you need, turn out to be a real chore. Arguments and mistakes characterize the service. When you're done, you're so grateful that the bad times have passed.

I mention my experience in the culinary industry because now, I'm in a different line of work. And you know what? Even though the two businesses couldn't be more different, there are a lot of similarities. Sometimes, it seems easy to get through the work presented. On other occasions, it's a real grind.

Take, for example, one of my first encounters in ordained ministry. One of the congregants called me up and told me they needed to make an appointment. The tone of their voice indicated two things. The matter was pressing and they were annoyed by whatever it was. We set up a time and I waited...anxiously.

When the congregant came it, we exchanged some cool pleasantries and then the reason for their appointment revealed itself. Being new, I assumed that her consternation must be coming over some theological matter within the church or perhaps some Biblical question needed my assistance. Imagine my surprise when these were the words which came out of her mouth, "If you remove that couch from the Youth Room, my husband and I are leaving the church."

Needless to say, this was not quite what I was expecting.

Now, not being quite the astute and experienced pastor that I am now, I have to tell you, I took the meeting in the wrong direction. I laughed. A couch? What could possibly be so special about a couch that this person was willing to leave a church where they'd been baptized over 60 years ago.

And while leaving the church over a couch seems a little petty, believe me, I've seen people bolt a church for reasons far less significant than that darned couch. For one reason or another, I've seen countless people wander away from a particular church which nurtured them for a variety of reasons, few of which make sense, if you asked me.

One woman left because she wasn't made an Elder in a particular year. I've seen people leave because a church played the wrong kind of music or the sanctuary was too cold or the sanctuary was too hot. Some people leave because they think the pastor's boring or the other members too influential. You name it, I've heard it. Now, to be fair, I have met some people who've left churches for what seem to be really valid and legitimate reasons. However, those cases are vastly dwarfed by the silly reasons.

Which is why Paul's words in First Corinthians might be so difficult to understand. After all, we live in a time and a place in which there are, sometimes quite literally, churches on nearly every corner here in

Charlotte. Turn the clock back to the very first Pentecost, and there weren't nearly so many options. In fact, there was just one.

One church, that is.

But, fairly quickly, things started to unravel. People, well, they started disagreeing with each other. They couldn't always see things eye-to-eye. And while the pace of it has rapidly increased in the present age, brothers and sisters in Christ started separating themselves from one another.

And while the reasons were not perhaps quite so petty as whether or not a couch was removed, they found reasons to bicker and break up nevertheless.

And I'm convinced, every time a member bolts for dubious reasons or a new denomination is formed, or ground is broken for still-yet-another cookie-cutter mega church, the church of Jesus Christ loses something of its precious unity.

I can't help thinking about it all from the perspective of thermodynamics. Thermodynamics is the property of energy to be exchanged within a system. Energy in a closed system is used up by work or heat loss. And every time energy is converted into work and heat, the system's entropy rises. When entropy rises, it becomes increasingly difficult for the system to do any appreciable work.

I think this is the perfect metaphor for the church of Jesus Christ right now. Having gone through immeasurable schisms, millions of bad break-ups, the constant pressure of the secular world around it, the church simply is not functioning as it should.

The Body is broken.

We can see this perceptibly here in our sanctuary this morning. Empty pew seats outnumber filled ones and that's not just because it's summer. We're by no means alone. In fact, the number of struggling churches on this road alone is probably quite depressing. The numbers of people in pews nationwide is in a tailspin and has been since the 1990's.

A large part of that problem arises from the fact that we seldom think of ourselves as Paul did in Corinthians. We aren't just another social grouping for sociologists to study, we together are the Body of Christ on Earth. As such, we together are the most powerful organization of people in the entire world.

Yet in a lot of ways, we're not quite that, are we?

It reminds me of a story I heard years ago. A pastor talked about a man in his congregation who went on a business trip. There was a really important deal being put together and this man was sent by the firm to go to St. Louis and wrap it all up. He did so but brought only one white dress shirt.

At breakfast on the morning of the meeting, the man orders some toast with strawberry jam. Sadly though, a giant glob of that jelly landed square on the front of the man's dress shirt. Even though he wiped it off quickly, there was not a big, red stain, noticeable to everyone.

Panicked, the man raced to a phone booth, opened the phone book (did I mention this story is old?) and scanned through the list of dry cleaners until he found the one he was looking for – "One Hour Dry Cleaners."

Off the man raced with his shirt. He had just enough time he figured to get there, get the shirt cleaned and then make his really important meeting. When the man arrived, he immediately took the shirt to the clerk and told him he needed the shirt cleaned in an hour.

The clerk looked at him and said this, "That's just the name of the store, man. We don't actually DO dry cleaning in an hour. I can get you your shirt back by Wednesday."

It's a funny story. But I can't help but wonder. How many people have arrived at church doors around the country hurting and desperate? Yearning for a Jesus they don't yet know they arrive at our doors looking for the Prince of Peace, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and we, in turn say, 'let me tell you about this couch that, should it leave the youth room, I'm leaving.'

Is it any wonder people aren't so interested in hanging out with us?

No, it isn't. In between the bickering within particular churches, the bickering between Christian organizations, competing theologies, entropy is high. We can't get anything done. Which is really terrible because the church is the means by which this world could, walk more and more, reflect the ways of the coming Kingdom and away from the mire of the world which surrounds us.

Several years ago, I watched a TED talk that I think made its way around the cultural consciousness a few years back. The talk is by a man named Simon Senek and is called, "Start with Why."

Senek, a leadership consultant, suggests that the difference between super successful companies like Apple and others is that Apple “starts with “why.” Why you do something, according to Senek, is the means by which you keep an organization energized and directed towards their mission. The other two matters, the how and what follow the why.

It is, I believe, a good way to look at the problem of entropy in the church right now. Why do we gather? Is it so that we can simply complain about couches? Or course not!

We gather this and every Sunday morning because of the greatest WHY in the history of the universe. The WHY of the church is that our God, who is love, chose to take action in and through His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. This Son, the Messiah, came and saw our need for salvation from sin. To free us from it, Jesus took on His body on the Cross the sin of the world. In that act, we are freed from sin and death and raised into New and eternal life in Jesus Christ. And that Jesus Christ, He told us to go to the ends of the earth in order to make disciples of all the nations.

That’s our how. In order to give glory to God for what He’s done for us through Jesus, we work tirelessly to make disciples so that they, in turn can make disciples until every knee shall bow to the Lamb. What those disciples do is the work of the Kingdom – they feed, they heal, they help, they serve.

That’s the church.

And in order to do it, there has to be unity. And this unity, it can’t be enforced, it has to be chosen. Organic. Like a body. Paul’s extended metaphor in I Corinthians 12 is right on the money. We are to be so unified that designations between us simply don’t exist as we set about our work. There is no unimportant job in this Holy effort.

You know, we got the chance to do something really, really neat at our last church. There, the leadership worked with a group that comes in and helps churches assemble a huge quantity of meals for people in third world countries. Within 6 hours, the church and a host of people they’d invited packaged over 100,000 individual meals. They played upbeat music and everyone had a job. To put out 100,000 meals take organization, preparation and systemization.

Soon, people were weighing, scooping, and sealing these meals. It became, for lack of better words, this amazing assembly line. It was a frenzy of activity. Even Lillian and Ben who were much younger at the time were able to help, carrying additional bags to the packing tables. At the end, we were tired. After all, you can’t put together that many meals without using a lot of energy.

But it was there. The energy, that is. Energy and excitement.

Which are exactly the elements lacking in most churches these days. Content to merely play out the side, most churches are locked into a pattern of decline and just don’t know how to change their dynamics.

The way out begins, well, at the beginning. With Jesus. Returning to the Word, we’ve got to remember that the church exists for but one reasons – to share the Gospel, the good news that in Jesus Christ, God has taken action to save sinners of which you and everyone else in all creation save our Lord is exactly and precisely that – a sinner. But Jesus Christ came not to call the righteous but rather sinners to repentance.

As the church takes that message out, one of salvation and repentance, sin and sanctification all from the Love shared with us by Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.