“No one ever wins a fight” (Howard Thurman). Everyone loses in a battle, even if it’s the loss of our own humanity. But some like a really good fight in the political or ecclesial ring. For some, the conflictual storm is the norm. But no one ever wins a fight, really. Even if one is crowned the champion, the winner, the President, too many have already died, been hurt, been wounded from the war of words, that there is no real winner because the collateral damage is already too great. No one wins a fight. We see this even in the impact of war on brave veterans and what happens to so many of them in this country—the culture of disregard and neglect is staggering. Wars are even waged in cyberspace with cyber-weapons and cyber-armor; people throw linguistic grenades to blow up others on Facebook or Twitter, but to what end? We aren’t winners of any online fight when it only takes 140 characters to tweet destruction and disrespect of another, revealing how some may only think in 140 characters too. I pray that our brains aren’t that small. We are in a wounded, unhappy world. Bloodied. Beaten. Divided. The divided states of America. O say can you see?

And before we think it’s just the nation-state that is in turmoil, just look at the Church. For centuries, it has been splintered into dozens of pieces. Denominational spin offs, even to this day—divided over biblical interpretation, ethics, theology, economics, governance, the ministry of Jesus, worship style, music choices, liturgical formality, and the list goes on, for centuries. Think about all of the different kinds of Baptists there are: Southern Baptist, Cooperative Baptist, National Baptist, Progressive National Baptist, American Baptist, Primitive Baptist, Holiness Baptist, Evangelical Baptist, Independent Baptist, Full Gospel Baptist, Freewill Baptist, Missionary Baptist, Seventh Day Baptist, Conservative Baptist, Reformed Baptist, Regular Baptist, Old Regular Baptist. Or enter any city or town, and you are bound to find a First Baptist, Second Baptist, Third Baptist and you know it wasn’t because they wanted to be Trinitarian; there was most likely a fight. We love a good fight but “no one ever wins a fight.”

What we see in the nation or church today is not anything new, unfortunately. Paul writes his letter to the church at Corinth because he’s been told that it’s a community torn by divisions (σχισματα), schisms. There’s lots of conflict. "Factionalism" (Margaret Mitchell) is the key fact in this community. Some of it is linked to socioeconomic stratification in the community. Some of it is linked to questioning Paul’s leadership authority. Some of it is connected to the understanding of what it means to be spiritual and embody that spirit in a community. But at the heart of where they have gone wrong as a church is that they’ve lost their Christic center. They’re focused on everything else but Jesus Christ. So, Paul writes and urges them to do away with their divisions and become “united,” the same word used for mending nets in the Gospels (cf. Mark 1:19). Paul calls for unity in Christ as a way to mend this broken church and mending is so needed in our world.
The Corinthian congregation was focused on everything else, every hot button issue, every person, but Christ. As Richard Hays notes, this church has magnified messengers and missed the message. Some in the community say, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” Apollos was a learned Jew from Alexandria, deeply grounded in scripture, and an effective and eloquent teacher of the gospel. Cephas was wonderful too—that’s the Aramaic name for Peter, the rock star disciple. The apostle Paul is an early church legend in his own right. But none of these individuals are Jesus the Christ.

And Christ cannot be divided up and parceled out into our affinity groups or theologies or political persuasions—a little Jesus over there or a little Jesus over here, making Jesus fit into our little kingdom. Maybe this Corinthian congregation reveals the ways we break the body of Christ into pieces yet in God’s mercy that same broken body of Jesus is what mends our brokenness and is what unites us.

There’s nothing wrong with identity markers per se. I’m Lutheran. I’m Calvinist. I’m Wesleyan. I’m Arminian. The church is heterogeneous just like the church at Corinth, which was a reflection of that ancient city. But when our identity markers become the core message and replace the crucified God, Jesus Christ, then problems will arise and we will split into splinters and have the apostle Paul ringing in our ears—“be united in the same mind and same purpose,” urging us to find our source of life in Christ, not any human leader or human cause.

Yet many will circle their lives around certain preachers or leaders, establishing personality cults. They worship, knowingly or unknowingly, other human beings. Joel Osteen. Bishop Eddie Long. TD Jakes. Other TV preacher celebrities. Other megachurch movers and shakers. In the past, some placed themselves in the group of David Koresh or Jim Jones as if they were the answer and those followers found out the truth when it was too late. No religious leader ever saved someone like Jesus did. None of them can resurrect. None of them can heal. But we so long to belong. People want to belong to something or someone, everything and everyone else, except Christ. Club sports. Fraternities or sororities. Rotary clubs or other affinity associations. Online chat groups. Yet even online we can be as Sherry Turkle's book says, *Alone Together*, because experiencing cyber-intimacies do not erase cyber-solitudes and actual loneliness and disconnectedness.

We just want to belong and go to great lengths to do so. Enduring Greek life hazing to get in, to be accepted, to have an identity, to feel wanted, to belong to something bigger than oneself. Paul’s dilemma in the Corinthian church is one of belonging. “I belong to Apollos.” “I belong to Cephas.” The problem is that they don’t know to whom they truly belong. The longing for belonging is natural.

The desire to belong is primal for humans. Psychologists have asserted a “belongingness hypothesis” which states “that human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong, that is, by a strong desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments” (Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary). We were made for community but if we belong to the wrong crowd or network we may only find our identity in a category of people or political persuasion or charismatic personality and by doing so, divide ourselves because we haven’t found the true unifying source that
causes us to belong to each other. We may wear a label of race, ethnicity, class, or gender which represents a larger group and functions as part of our identity but we don’t belong to these categories. There’s an illusion that we do, making us feel safe and wanted. “I belong to Latino.” “I belong to the middle class.” I belong. We want to belong so badly—that’s what’s actually at stake.

And we may try to straightjacket ourselves into any category created for us in order to belong to something but in the process we may lose who we truly are. We can strive to live someone else’s life and not the life that wants to live in us. We just want to belong and be worth something but it’s not worth living someone else’s life because that’s really no life at all. This is why the poem, “Alma Mater” written by a Stanford University alum (Mary Poindexter McLaughlin, ’87), struck me:

No doubt she’s disappointed.

Such a disgrace I turned out to be.
Not a policy-maker
Or tech-savvy entrepreneur
Nothing of note.

I gave birth three times
And sent three
Tall, kind people
Into the world

I offered words of consolation
I planted sunflowers
I listened

Elected official?
Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist?
Cutting-edge thought-leader?
MD, PhD, CEO?
Oscar, Emmy, Tony?
Nobel?
Anything?

I closed my mother’s eyes
When she died
And again, my father’s

I made no fortune
No headlines
Nothing went viral

I sang and danced
For no one
I remembered
I noticed
I breathed

Just an ordinary life
Filled with extraordinary love.

How disappointing.

This sarcastic alum refused to give into the imposed expectations of who she was supposed to be or do, placed on her, perhaps by an elite institution or a corporation or a family member or a political party. But she did her. She belonged to the human race, breathed, and aimed to love with her feet on the ground amongst the sunflowers. She knew that sometimes we might find ourselves under pressure, implicit or explicit, to be in this or that group and act this or that way to find a place or a people to whom to belong. But all of that will never satisfy the deep desire to belong, ultimately.

Paul’s church members at Corinth did not only claim to belong to other people, but the ones they named were those with some status. Apollos, the eloquent and well-respected preacher and teacher. Peter, the esteemed disciple. Paul, the great missionary, church planter, and theologian of the cross. People linked themselves to these individuals because they had some sort of status and privilege in their own right. They had an assumed power and we want power or access to it. We want to be known by the powerful. We want to have their ear and eye, their money, their network, their time. We want meetings with them with cameras present to let others know of our significance, thus of our power too, demonstrating that somehow we belong to power.

But human power is not all that it’s made out to be. Lyndon B. Johnson was the Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate before 1960 and in that role was deemed “the second most important man in Washington.” But beginning in January, 1961, he was Vice-President of the United States, a position with virtually no power in it. The first Vice President, John Adams, called the Vice-Presidency “the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived.” There was even a joke that circled the capital of Washington about the unfortunate mother who had two sons who were never heard from again: one was lost at sea, and the other became Vice-President. One former Vice President was quoted as saying the job was “not worth a bucket of warm spit.” Human power is not all that it’s made out to be. Even Gershwin’s musical, Of Thee I Sing, gets in on the joke and has the Presidential candidate not even recalling the Vice-President candidate’s name (Robert A. Caro).

We want to be connected to power but real power is not of our own making. Real power is found in the cross of Christ. We’ve misplaced our longing for belonging because we’ll never truly belong, never truly rest, until we find our rest in God.

“I belong to Christ” is a phrase supporting spiritual rest and wholeness because to be somebody in the world is to belong to the body of Christ. "The church is saved and sustained only in the name of Jesus” (Hays). Belonging to that name provides a sense of worth and meaning and purpose. We will never truly belong anywhere until we find ourselves in Christ and it is by belonging to him that we
end up belonging to his body, the one body of Christ, belonging to each other as parts of one whole, a beloved community. Belonging to him makes us, as a collective, the children of God, and as such, an interrelated web of mutuality in which our destinies are tied together, so when one suffers, all suffer, and when one rejoices, all rejoice. It is then we may realize that we belong to the body of Christ. Otherwise, all we have are clannish divisions, individual or group identities with no real power. Whenever we gather around or focus our lives on other people, or other identity markers, we will end up with problems. Of course, we want to belong and our baptism is an immersion into the body and life of Christ through whom we find unity and our core identity. If we say, “I’m a liberal democrat” or “I’m a conservative Republican” or I’m this or I’m that, it becomes so easy to forget to whom we really belong and with whom we should really identify. We may forget that we are children of the most high God, sons and daughters of Christ. Baptism reminds us, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3).

I’m not saying that our particular identities or groupings are all destructive nor am I calling for an erasure of ourselves. I’m glad I can still be a MethoBapticostal! But I’m saying that we don’t belong to any label or anyone or anything else. We belong to Christ. And at a time when some have been told that they don’t belong in this country, it’s so important to affirm that they do belong in this country while also asserting that none of us belong to this country. National, political, religious, or cultural group identities do not own us for we belong to Christ.

An innate human desire is to belong and I want others, regardless of any specific identity, to declare, “I belong.” I am accepted. I am loved because I belong to Christ. I belong, you belong, we belong to Christ, bought with the price of his blood and body. In belonging to him, you’ll tap into power too, a different kind of power. The power to save, the power to heal, the power of peace, the power of love. All power isn’t bad. It depends on how you use it. Christ wields power by relinquishing it, giving it away—the power to love and the power to die, the power to unify and to mend a broken world.

So if we belong to Christ and his body, let’s be his unifying body in the world. Where there is hate, sow love; where is injury, sow pardon; where there is doubt, sow faith; where there is despair, sow hope; where there is darkness, sow light; where there is sadness, sow joy; where there is division, sow unity; because no one ever wins a fight. I’m done with fighting. I belong to Christ. I don’t need to fight. I need to love.