

“Holy Diversity” – 1 Cor 12:1-11 – 2nd Sunday after Epiphany – Jan 14/07

As I look out from my workstation here (the pulpit), I am blessed to see a wondrous group of people. If the truth be known, I see a whole group of “different” people! No, on second thought, let me rephrase that – a group of people in which each of you have unique and differing talents, and skills, and personalities, and spiritual gifts – and that is a wondrous and holy thing, exactly what the apostle Paul was talking about in his letter to the congregation at Corinth so many years ago.

“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters,” we heard in the opening of this part of his long letter to them, which gives us a clue that Paul was responding, as he often did, to a question or perhaps some questions that they had sent to him. But even here we have to make some guesses ... you see the language that Paul used to answer them leaves it unclear as to whether he is talking about spiritual gifts, or spiritual persons. Indeed, Paul was such a wonderful writer that it is entirely possible that the congregation had asked him about “spiritual brothers”, and he has – right in the very opening of his reply – cleverly shifted the subject from “spiritual brothers” to “spiritual gifts” through some deliberately vague Greek.

Paul then provides us with some more clues as to the situation into which he was responding, as he continues in his opening comments to remind these new Christians in Corinth of some of their old practices – and by implication how some of those old practices seem to have crept into their current practice of the Christian faith. And by way of that introduction, Paul reminds them not only of the importance of the Holy Spirit but goes on to comment on the variety of gifts provided to people by the Holy Spirit, and activated by the one Lord and God. He even goes on to enumerate a list of those gifts – utterance of wisdom, distinct from utterance of knowledge, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, and last of all speaking in and interpretation of tongues. All interesting stuff, especially the order in which he lists the gifts, if we can rightly assume that he has listed them in the order of most important to least important (which seems a valid assumption when we read on to see what else he has to say, particularly about how he considers the gift of tongues to be perhaps the least of the gifts.)

However, what I find the most fascinating about what Paul has to say to the people in Corinth comes from reading between the lines, from trying to understand the specific situation to which he was writing. We can never know with absolute certainty what that situation was, because we do not have the original letter from the congregation (minister? elders? some “concerned” members?) If we did have that letter – or those letters – we might still have to do some interpolating, because they most likely asked questions of Paul rather than stated complaints. But Paul was, if nothing else, wise in the ways of people and seems to have understood with great clarity what the underlying root issues were, and addressed those root issues in his replies.

It seems clear that there were some concerns expressed to him about how the new Christian faith was being practiced in Corinth. Specifically it seems that there was some arguing going about which faith practices were more important than others – and by correlation arguing as to which people were more “important” than others. No doubt there were pressures being applied for all to “progress” to the most important practices. Underlying all of this of course is that disturbing question that still today provides some of the greatest abuse in the Christian faith – namely the question, “what makes a real Christian?”, or worse yet, “who are the real Christians?”

Sadly Paul’s answers seem to have been largely ignored in the Christian church, because here we are some two thousand years later and the same pagan-inspired practices still emerge, and the arguments still swirl like dark clouds, obscuring the light of God’s love in Christ. Sadly also the arguments so quickly turn to the negative, to identifying who is not a “real” Christian, don’t they? The list of reasons is endless ... all you have to do is fill in the blank ... “he/she is not a ‘real’ Christian because they don’t (choose one) pray enough, pray loudly enough, pray on their knees, pray on their face, come to church often enough, dress properly, speak with a Scottish accent, give enough money, read the Bible enough, bow low enough, feel unworthy enough, ... I’m sure you have heard many more! In some really bizarre

situations the “real” Christians are only those who insert meat hooks through their flesh and get hoisted into the air by cranes. Good grief – I’m sure it would make Paul, and even Jesus, weep!

Often the criticism of whether a person is a “real” Christian or not is much more subtle, even if the pressure to conform is more intense. Have you ever been to a worship service in one of those huge arena-like campus churches? The ones where during a musical offering (I cannot use the word “hymn” here) everyone stands and waves their arms in the air, kind of like an antenna for a spiritual radio receiver? Have you ever dared to not wave your arms? If so, you’ll understand the subtle pressure to conform – you may even have seen those around you praying that you will be saved from your rebellion! There is a huge pressure in such situations to conform – to hold your hands “just so”, to close your eyes in a dreamy look, to sway (but not just side-to-side; there’s a corresponding twist to the shoulders that is also necessary or it’s not a “real” sway!), just a touch of an ecstatic smile, all of these are necessary components or you’re apparently not having a “real” spiritual experience!

Have you ever wondered how the Holy Spirit feels about being put into such a straight-jacket? I have, often, and I realize that it is the incredible grace and love of God that helps the Holy Spirit to fill people even under such dreadfully comic circumstances. It is clear from what Paul had to say that the Spirit is much more into diversity than uniformity – varieties of gifts, varieties of services, varieties of activities – holy diversity reflecting the infinite creativity of God, and the wonderful differences in people. We are not called to be a society of clones, all dressed the same, smiling the same, reacting in lock-step fashion to some charismatic leader – we are called to be ourselves, gifted with varied personalities and widely-differing skills, gifted also with the manifestations of the Holy Spirit through the grace of God.

But back to Paul’s answer to the people who were arguing inanely about who was more important than whom, based upon which spiritual practices they favoured. Apart from his opening poke at remembered pagan practices, Paul makes it clear that the people cannot assume any importance based on their faith practices, because those practices are gifts of the Holy Spirit. Not inherent characteristics of any person, but truly a gift from God. These “charisma’s”, from which our contemporary word “charismatic” derives, are given through the Holy Spirit and activated by God (the word “charisma” in Greek means “gift”.) The implication is clear, even if terribly uncomfortable for many charismatics – these capabilities, these activities are not discovered from some internal source within, are neither created nor cultivated by us, have nothing to do with how clever we are, or how righteous we are, or how faithful we are – these are gifts from God, “allotted to each one individually as the Spirit chooses” – the words are Paul’s, the emphasis is mine! No-one can claim some special importance just because they have received a gift.

Indeed, the opposite is more likely the case – the more important the gift, the greater the burden of using the gift properly, namely as it was intended to be used (and thus the greater the likelihood of failing to do so). And so the key question that should be asked, and indeed the key question that was already answered by Paul, is “how are these gifts to be used?” Self-gratification? Nope. To boost one’s status and standing in the church? Nope. For profit or material gain? God forbid! To demonstrate or to enhance power? Absolutely not! What then is the intended purpose behind the bestowing of these gifts? According to Paul, “to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” “For the common good.” Aha – not for the individual, but for the community of faith. That certainly puts the kibosh on anyone’s attempt to use a spiritual gift for personal advantage, doesn’t it? Once we start examining the use of any spiritual gift to determine whether it is for the common good it certainly puts a different perspective on the meaning of “charismatic”, doesn’t it?

Eventually in this same letter, Paul will go on to answer the question of which is the most important gift, and will proclaim the answer to that question as being the gift from God that eclipses all of the gifts listed here, so much so that without that most important gift of all these gifts are without meaning. But that’s for another sermon, on another day – say, two weeks from today.