

“Paul’s Anatomy” – 1 Cor 12:12-31a – Epiphany 3 – Jan 21/07

Well, the Apostle Paul really opened a can of worms here, didn’t he? Well, actually, it was not here but in last week’s reading that he opened that can of worms – or maybe it was the good folks in the congregation at Corinth that did so. You might recall that last week we looked at Paul’s answer to one or more questions from people in that congregation about spiritual gifts, in particular the gift of tongues. He provided a reminder that there are many varieties of spiritual gifts, all given by the one Holy Spirit. In fact, he went on at some length to point out not only the wide variety of gifts but that such diversity was truly God-given.

Now, if Paul had left it there, what do you think would be the natural outcome not only in the congregation at Corinth but in all the other congregations that have existed since then? Yes, in a word, chaos. You see, with that answer about many kinds of gifts, he opened the door to an unbridled individualism by the faithful – a situation in which everybody could decide on their own which gift they thought they had. Notwithstanding that Paul provided a list with half-a-dozen identifiable gifts, people would feel free to invent new gifts, and proclaim loudly that they have such a spiritual gift.

How do we know they would? Because they have – and continue to do so today. This situation of “many kinds of gifts – pick one, or invent one” was bad enough in the early days of the church, as people groped and fumbled trying to figure out what the church should look like and how people of faith should exercise their faith. But that situation of rampant individualism blossomed and flourished in the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason that began some three hundred years ago.

The problem is not so much the exercise of individuality, or even the “invention” of gifts of the Spirit, for heaven knows that God is more than capable of offering more than a half-dozen gifts to people of faith. No, the real problem – and one that was recognized by and addressed by Paul – is the divisions within and the splitting apart of the church. With the rampant modernist sense of “I as an individual am completely right in all my understandings” there is a correlating defiant stand that “you can’t tell me I’m wrong – I’m as right as anybody else – so there!”

There are a number of ways to address – or combat – such individualism both within and without the church, and the church has at one time or another tried them all. One obvious way, that more-or-less worked up until the Reformation in the late 1500’s and early 1600’s was to exercise absolute power and control over the people and what they think. Mind you, that approach has its problems, as the population gets a bit sick and tired of the torture chambers and public executions, and is rather out of favour at the moment. The corruption within the ranks of those who were doing the controlling – mostly the clergy but also the politicians (often a bad combination!) – simply made the method of absolute control a no-go.

Another way to address the problem of individualism is to either foster it or let it run rampant. One key problem with this approach is that so many differing groups get created through the constant splitting apart and self-partitioning off of smaller groups who are convinced they have the “absolutely right” answers. Given enough time – and it’s clear enough that plenty of time has been given – the church devolves into a chaotic collection of contrasting if not competing ideas, and we can understand why people outside the church have no idea what the church is about – especially when people within the church have no idea what the church is or should be about.

But there is a third way. At the heart of this problem lies the tension, the struggle, between “the one and the many”. We are called to be one in Christ, as we acknowledge and proclaim his sacrifice upon the cross was for all who would accept the redemption he offered, yet we are undeniably different as individuals, with unique and separate gifts given by God, activated by the Holy Spirit. As we gather in congregations and denominations we come together at the intersection of One Way and Different

Paths, and there is an inevitable tension there between the desire to be one and the natural urge to be different.

Tension in itself is not necessarily a problem. Such tension, when properly understood and lived, can be the inspiration for great creativity and interest and excitement. However, when badly managed or worse yet fostered into division, can and does result in hostility, anger, and conflict. Whether open warfare or subversive guerilla action, that kind of conflict is both destructive and self-destructive, and most often results not only in the collapse and destruction of a congregation but also in the driving away of people from faith in Christ.

The problem then is not the tension between the one and the many, but in understanding the tension and managing it properly. Paul here uses a common idiom of his own day to provide a model for understanding that inevitable tension, namely the model of the human body. It was a model with which all the congregation in Corinth would be familiar, as it was commonly used in those days especially to describe the diverse political alignments and structures in place. In a hugely familiar, yet often forgotten or ignored model, Paul points out how our bodies are complex systems, made up of many different components, all of which play an important role. We can (perhaps as he hoped his readers in Corinth would) even laugh as we share with him some bizarre images, such as a talking foot declaring that it was not going to participate because it was not a hand. Mind you, it is easier some days than others to believe that certain parts of the body, like sore feet, weak knees, aching backs, arthritic shoulders, can and do protest loudly. But Paul's examples of talking feet and complaining ears provide us with cartoon-like images, and we can chuckle along with him over these pictures.

But Paul has more than just a functioning model in mind for his image of the body. "You are the body of Christ, and individually members of it", he declares, and what a body it is! Heads and toes, hands and elbows, what a glorious collection of disparate people make up a congregation, especially a congregation like Central. But Paul wants us to understand that there is something more than just the parts functioning more or less in harmony, that we actually "are the body of Christ and individually members of it." This is not merely a functional thing but a sacred and holy thing, as Paul declares, "for in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." And what a body it is! Diverse, unwieldy, complex; and Paul does return to the central question of the diversity of at the end of this passage, even providing a list of roles and gifts, with an admonition to "strive for the greater gifts."

However, as important as these two passages – last week's and today's – are, and as meaningful as our understanding of gifts and roles in the church, Paul is about to provide a huge qualifier, a condition that if not met means that none of these gifts, skills, positions are worth anything in the body of Christ. But as I said last week, that's another sermon, for another Sunday – in fact, next week!