

Sunday, February 12, 2017

Rev. Robert W. Brown

BEING CHURCH

1 Corinthians 12:1-27

INTRODUCTION:

About three years prior to writing his first letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul had established a Christian church in the city of Corinth. In the year 55 AD, Corinth was the commercial and political hub for all of Greece. It was a thriving crossroads of commerce and trade. Corinth was also well known for its immorality. There were an abundance of temples offering religious practices that encouraged promiscuity and self-indulgence as a form of worship to a variety of Greek gods.

Paul had received word that the young church had developed divisive factions, engaged erroneous practices and was suffering an anemic spirituality. His letter is an attempt to reorient the church toward holiness, Godly love and **Christian unity** above all else.

In chapter 12 Paul uses the powerful image of the body as a metaphor for unity, pointing out that even though the body has many parts, there is still one organized, functioning body. Every part, Paul argues, contributes to the wholeness and health of the body and each distinctive part has a specific function to perform in the working of the whole. Paul strongly urges the church to be like "one body," bound together in mutual love.

From Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth chapter 12...

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. ²You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. ³Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. ⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. ¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For 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. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not

consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body.

²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.



Stephanie is a documented immigrant from Haiti. She is in her twenties, young, energetic, tall, athletic and stunningly beautiful. For a few months Stephanie was a caretaker for Natalie’s mother who was in hospice care in our home. Every evening Stephanie came to our house she gifted us with her indomitable, bright spirit. She glowed like morning sunlight, warming the cold dark shadows that inevitably shroud every hospice vigil. During that time we got to know a bit of her story.

When she was a young teenager, Stephanie’s parents divorced. She came to the United States to live with her father and stepmother. It didn’t go well. Her stepmother was abusive and jealous and mean-spirited. Stephanie willingly suffered the cruelty because she knew that in the United States she would have opportunity, education and employment. As soon as she could, Stephanie launched out on her own. She found work caring for developmentally disabled adults during the day and also took a job as a nightshift caregiver for in-home hospice care. All of her income, beyond paying the bills, she sent home to her family in Haiti. Stephanie told us how her mother back home kept having children despite severe poverty and even worse, the youngest infant desperately needed corrective surgery on a deformed foot. Stephanie was the child’s only hope for paying the bill for the operation.

One afternoon, as she floated into our house like Mary Poppins, I asked her how she was able to keep such joy and enthusiasm in her heart while working so hard and giving so much to others. “In my culture”, she said. “We are like one body. There is no ‘me’ or ‘you’ there is only us. This is the very essence of life, to connect with others and allow others to connect with you. There is nothing else.”

Please pray with me...

Creator God, Divine Presence, Giver of life and love, draw near to us this morning as we lean into Your presence. Prepare our hearts to receive your word, and may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts hasten the day that we truly become one in unity with You, our Triune God. Amen.

It's difficult to describe the ease in which Stephanie answered my question. It was as if I had asked her how she kept breathing. I have noticed, that for so many people outside our culture that the reality of being inextricably connected and responsible for one another is as fundamental and essential as breathing. It's not a philosophical choice, it just is. Here in the United States we are raised differently. In America, individual self-reliance and upward mobility is prized above all else. We are taught that self-interest and personal advancement is our inalienable right in the pursuit of happiness. So it's only natural that we also possess this righteous compulsion to fiercely protect what's ours. We build walls to insure our independence and vigorously defend our right to exclude others who might impede our opportunity for improvement. In this culture, it is only after we have satiated our hunger for fulfillment that we look out at the other and extend a helping hand while thanking God for our ability to do so. This is always the way of the dominant culture and it is so deeply ingrained in us that I think most of us don't even see it as a problem. I was shocked at my righteous anger that Stephanie would give so much loving care to others, work day and night in service to others only to then give her money away to a half-brother she would probably never even meet. It seemed so unfair. Yet for her this way of life was not even close to self-sacrifice or even worthy of praise. Giving back and caring for others was what nourished her joy and gave her life meaning and fulfillment. Her very identity and deepest blessing – the very thing that fueled her beautiful, warm spirit - was having the ability and opportunity to contribute freely to the whole.

I think this is what Paul wants the Church in Corinth to become. He tells us that there is a Oneness in all of God's creation. We are connected and held together by the Spirit of God, that mysterious life-giving power that animates all things into life. It's as if The Holy Spirit of God has written this celestial composition and orchestrated exquisite harmonic parts for each individual to sing. Our job is to find our individual note and sing that part with abandon. God will take care of the rest.

All of us begin life as an accident of birth. We didn't choose our race, socio economic ranking, or nationality of origin. Many of us at here at TriCon were born into privilege and a degree of affluence when compared to the rest of the world. Many of us have leveraged whatever freedom we have and ceased every opportunity to expand our wealth and secure our power. There is nothing what so ever wrong with that, it's how we were raised and enlightened self-interest is foundational in our culture. Our privilege, education and opportunity is the note we

have been given to sing and we should sing it loud and proud. Wealth and power are neutral. But as followers of Christ we must recognize that there are many other notes in this arrangement and to exclude, ignore, demonize or marginalize any single one of them is to risk missing the beauty and perfect harmony that God intends for all of us. The more convinced we are of our exceptionalism and political correctness, the more exclusive and judgmental we will become. As our point of view narrows and hardens the more likely we are to totally miss our very reason for being. I think Paul is attempting to articulate a prescription for reorienting a narrowed church that is losing its way.

Ideally, being Church is rehearsing this cosmic chord in all its fullness and range. Church is designed to be the place where we bring the best and worst of who we authentically are into community with the expressed purpose of intentionally caring for one another, respecting one another and honoring one another with equal esteem. Being Church is to recognize our common frailty and courageously reveal our shared imperfection so that grace can be set free to heal our woundedness. Being Church is to practice distancing ourselves from the dominant culture by celebrating extravagant generosity as our primary purpose and indulge freely in the expectation that forgiveness will be easily given and gratefully received. A loving, grace-filled church can become the antidote to the self-destructive poison of resentment and anger and neutralize the acidity of false moral outrage and negative identity.

According to Paul, church unity is not built on likeminded uniformity, exclusive exceptionalism or homogeneous standardization. The unity found in Church is actually defined more by its diversity. In fact, differences within the church are, astonishingly, what God has built in from the beginning. It's the only way we can truly function as the Body of Christ. The Church is created for us to lift up the inherent dignity and value in difference. Diversity truly reflects a multifaceted God. Ideally, Church allows the discovery of our individual, self-differentiated uniqueness in within a community that rehearses the Divine Oneness.

Today our church will convene our Annual Meeting. It is a chance to look back and evaluate how we are being Church. Are we holding true to our mission? Are we being the church that God is calling us to be? Do we honor one another as indispensable parts of the body? And how might we adapt with a resiliency that is open to the Spirit's leading?

If you stick around after our Worship you will hear stories and listen to reports that clearly indicate that we are indeed being Church. Together, we are carefully watching and listening for signs that point our direction forward. Nearly every one of you is involved in some kind of TriCon activity beyond Sunday morning, giving what you can, finding your note and singing your part. This is how we find strength in uncertainty and nurture hope for a future together beyond these pews, a future that can proclaim like Paul this extraordinary good news to a hurting and anxious world that we are connected to one another and responsible for one

Sunday, September 30, 2012



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another. "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. We are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

TriCon we are in fact being Church. May God continue working the miracle.

