

January 24, 2010 – Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a; Luke 4: 14-21

ONCE UPON A TIME IN CORINTH¹

Paul's letter reminds us that there were many divisions in the church in Corinth... between more conservative Jewish Christians and more liberal Greek Christians, between the politically enslaved and the politically free, between those who emphasize speaking in tongues and those who emphasized speaking boldly about Christ, between the followers loyal to the teachings of Paul or Peter or Apollos. There were many feisty factions in this church and they wrote to the Apostle Paul for guidance, asking him, "What shall we do with all these divisions in the church?"

Paul addresses the issue of diversity and division with the church – not altogether different from the conflicts found in the church today in our time and place.

Paul's letter reminds us that we are filled with gifts of the Holy Spirit to help one another. When we work in harmony with one another it is possible to look up to heaven together, to sigh with relief that we have partners in serving our Lord. When Christian unity is what we seek we are open to God's divine purpose – we hear and clearly speak the good news. This is how we become instruments of God's compassion and justice in the world – how we begin to do all things well and fulfil the scripture as Jesus intends.

Let me tell you about something that happened, or maybe it didn't, once upon a time...

It was many years ago that The Reverend Paul arrived on Vancouver Island. He stayed a couple of years and established a congregation. Paul was a great teacher and a brilliant theologian. His theology was scholarly and profound – he taught about grace. But to be honest, Paul was not much of a preacher – he wasn't eloquent and he didn't share stories well. He wasn't especially good at pastoral care either. He tended to bristle and be argumentative when people disagreed with him. But he was a great theologian – he knew the Gospel. And like all founding pastors, one day The Reverend Paul left town.

The second pastor to come to that congregation was a woman named Apollos. Now, she was a charismatic preacher. She was eloquent. There was a passion to her preaching, and the church really grew under her leadership. But, to be honest, she wasn't the theologian and teacher that the founding minister was, and she too eventually left town.

Now, there was another minister, a Mr. Peter who also influenced the congregation. Peter was a real traditionalist. He said, "You have to do it the old way, the way we did it back in the old country, when truth was truth." His motto was, "Gospel and tradition."

At some point this congregation on Vancouver Island was without a minister, and the several deep divisions in the church became more evident. Some people liked the way that Paul did things; others liked the way that Apollos worked; and still others like preferred Peter's more traditional style. The divisions became deeper and deeper until finally they called a congregational meeting. All the local Christians from this congregation on Vancouver Island came to the meeting. They came to share their convictions – to "tell it like it is!"

Here is the gist of what was said as each person took their turn at the gathering...

The first person to approach the microphone announced: *I am a Christian. I love the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I love the Bible. The Bible is a guide for my daily life. It is clear in the book of Genesis that God designed the world so that there is male and female, that marriage is to be between a man and a woman. It is clear in the Old Testament that God condemns same sex relationships and same sex marriages. The New Testament clearly states that God condemns same sex relationships and same sex marriages. The overwhelming evidence of the Bible clearly embraces heterosexual relationships. We Christians are called to love the sinner but hate the sin.*

The next person to speak said this: *You and I think differently about these things. I too am a Christian and I love the Gospel and the Bible. When the Bible was written, its authors believed many things that we no longer believe today. For them, the earth was flat, slavery was endorsed, women were inferior, and homosexuality was automatically condemned. But the world has changed from those ancient days. We now know that the earth is not flat, that slavery is wrong, that women are different than men but equal. And homosexuality? Well, for many people we all know homosexuality is like being born left-handed. People don't choose their sexual orientation – it is deep within each one of us. Jesus invites us to love all people, including loving those people whom others often condemn.*

You could feel the tension in the air and between the people. Here were good, loving Christian people who felt so deeply but differently about issues and situations.

When the third person rose, she said: *I am a Christian. I love the Gospel. The Spirit of Christ lives in me, and I know for sure that nuclear weapons are an abomination of God. The stockpiling of nuclear weapons is the greatest sin of our century and violates every principle of Jesus. These weapons destroy innocent civilians, unborn babies, and the land for generations to come. Christ and his followers would never sanction the use of nuclear weapons.*

No sooner had that person moved to her seat when another voice was heard to say: *I too am a Christian. The Spirit of Christ lives in me. I love the freedom of the Gospel. God made us human beings to long for human freedom and to hate slavery. The Bible lays the foundational principles for freedom... for both religious and political freedom. For political freedom to survive in our generation, it takes a strong defence. In today's real world, the threat of nuclear weapons helps to preserve peace and freedom. Attempts to abolish nuclear weapons increase the possibility of their use. You (pointing to the crowd) in your religious self righteousness, contribute to nuclear madness!*

And so it went. The divisions at this congregational meeting were revealed – feelings ran deep – convictions passionately held.

There were many Christians at the congregational meeting on Vancouver Island who knew and loved the Gospel, but didn't know and like each other very much. These Christians felt their own point of view was the right one, the one that God agreed with.

When the next person came to the microphone people were nervous about what he might say so they listened warily: *Nobody is mentioning the important issue here, the authority of the Bible. The Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God. I know that some of you wonder about the word, "inerrant." You*

want to be able to twist the Bible so that the Bible will endorse your prejudices: abortion on demand, divorce on demand, pro evolution, no concern for world evangelization. You don't take the Bible seriously and you don't read it devotionally. For you and your kind, the Bible is manipulated to endorse the latest cultural trend.

A responder was on his feet quick as a wink to proclaim: *That's not fair, you literalist. The Bible is the inspired and authoritative Word of God. My life is nourished by the Gospel. The Bible is my source of salvation, my guide for living, food for the Spirit of Christ in me. But you... you use the Bible to condemn others – to force couples to remain in violent marriages – to promote creation theology as science, all in the name of religion. You snap at people you don't like with passages in the Bible, as if the Bible were a whip to beat them up with.*

There were many other divisions discussed. Some wanted their members to excel in a spirit filled prayer life; others wanted their members to excel in speaking boldly for Christ.

Just when it seemed that things were calming down someone else piped up: *I would like to say something. Please, I need to speak. Some people don't realize it but this area is very unchurched. Most of our neighbours don't have a church home. We can argue all day about nuclear wars; we can fight all night about abortions and the Bible, but the primary mission of the church is to go and make disciples. Let's stop arguing about this other stuff and get busy with the real mission of the church – evangelism! – Evangelism of our neighbourhood and the whole world. Go and make disciples!!!*

You might not think anyone could disagree with that but you would be mistaken because soon someone stepped in to say: *That man there wants to save the souls of billions but he doesn't say anything about their bodies and bellies. The great commission? How about the great commandment? Love God with all your heart, mind and soul, and your neighbour as yourself. We need to be concerned about justice in the world. What do we give to the poor? Just crumbs from the rich man's table. Ours is a God of justice. God wants all nations; ours included, to stop spending billions of dollars for weapons and armament and redirect government economic power to care for the poor of the world. Our God wants justice for the poor. YOU may believe in the great commission. I believe in the great commandment!!!*

And so, the tensions got worse and worse. The problem was this: Deep down inside, everyone thought that the Spirit inside of them was the correct one. These Christians had a private disdain for those who didn't think, believe, and feel as they did. What to do? Well, finally, at the conclusion of this tense and lengthy congregational meeting, they decided to write a letter to their founding minister, The Reverend Paul, this great theologian and teacher. Paul wrote back to the congregation and, believe it or not, I have a copy of the letter here with me. Let me read a portion of it to you...

There is one Spirit, but a variety of gifts.
There is one Lord, but a variety of ways that people serve.
There is one God and Father, but a variety of ways that people work for the kingdom.

God gives different gifts to different people.
Some, a passion for peace; others, a passion for political freedom
Some, a passion for life and its sacredness; others, a passion for forgiveness and mercy
Some, enthusiasm for a more closed interpretation of the Bible; others, enthusiasm for a more open interpretation of the Bible
Some, a passion for evangelism; others, a passion for justice

All of these people who spoke are working for the common good. Each and every one of them is inspired by the one and same Spirit, the Spirit who gives to each person their unique and different perspective.

For just as the human body is a unified whole, composed of millions of different parts, so is Christ and his body.

The human body is miraculously complex: with 60 million cells – 36 million heart beats every year – 300 billion red cells produced every day – 60,000 miles of blood vessels in each body.

Just as the human mind cannot begin to fathom the complexity of its own body, so it is with us, with the body of Christ. Our minds cannot comprehend the complexity of the body of Christ.

Christ is a living body, composed of billions of parts, miraculously complex, with billions of members, located in millions of different settings, with thousands of different languages, with thousands of unique cultures and billions of expressions of faith, throughout all the centuries of recorded time.

The human mind cannot begin to fathom the complexity of the body of Christ, anymore than the human mind can imagine the 60,000 miles of blood vessels in one's own physical body.

If you have these gifts, if you have these passions in your heart, these workings, these ways of serving God's kingdom; but if you don't have love inside of you for your brothers and sisters who think and feel differently than you, you are nothing. The greatest gift that God has for you is love. Love for people who don't think like you. Love for people who do not share your point of view. You are to make love your greatest purpose for life.

And so, the words from Paul were read to the church and the people realized that they were part of this mysteriously complex, living organism, the body of Christ. They all drank from the same Spirit, and were joyful and glad, that they were one – one in the Spirit of the Living Christ who unified them in love.

That's how it happened, or maybe it didn't, once upon a time... **Amen**

¹ Adapted from **Division, Diversity, and Oneness in the Parish: A Conflict Drama**; a sermon by Edward F. Markquart