

“For the Common Good”

2nd Sunday Epiphany

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

January 17, 2010

Many years ago I was asked to get to know a young man before he died. The man was in his early 30's, maybe late 20's. It was his mother who approached me and asked this of me. You see, the man was dying of AIDS. She asked me to come visit her son and to get to know him, which I did.

Over the span of a few months I got to know Scott quite well, as well as his parents, his partner, and his sister. As the days rolled into weeks and the weeks into years I couldn't forget the first conversation his mother and I had. In that conversation she said something unusual to me. She told me that the reason she wanted me to get to know Scott was that she did not want a “cookie-cutter funeral. She didn't want a “one-size fits all” general, fill in the blanks, kind of funeral service. That image stayed with me. In fact, it became the metaphor of my message and I bought a cookie-cutter just to make the point when I preached at his funeral. It was this cookie-cutter in fact.

I keep this cookie-cutter in my office. It reminds me not to pigeonhole people, to lump people into one group or another. It helps me not to use sweeping generalizations when describing people. Unfortunately this is easier said than done. Try as I may, it is so easy to put people into groups, bad categories, and see them as typical or the same as so many others. This is not only an unwise thing to do, but it is contrary to God's will.

Our lesson from Paul reminds us that not only do we have a common bond, a unity in Christ, but amid the unity there is a rich diversity that needs to be recognized, celebrated, and valued. In a culture in which we seek sameness, and react negatively to those who look and think differently, valuing and celebrating diversity is a difficult thing to achieve.

One of the main critiques Paul lodges against the Corinthian congregation is their inability to live out the essential claim of a community founded in the Gospel. The Corinthian congregation needs to be reminded that its birth, identity, and existence as a Christian community are grounded in the death of Christ, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (2:2). The very cross of Christ is at stake when a community of believers gathers without living out the radical equality of a power made perfect in weakness. The divisions and disagreements within the Corinthian church became the central purpose of Paul's correspondence and spur us to necessary reflection on our own communal behavior. □ □

The 64-dollar question becomes, “How do we deal with difference?” How do we accept each for being unique and at the same time not make the Christian life relative, with no accountability to one another. Can these words from Paul help us to embrace difference, to look for difference, and to entertain the idea that cookie-cutter Christians are not whom God has in mind?

This past week, with the tragedy in Haiti from a devastating earthquake there are political pundits, talk radio hosts, and TV evangelists using this as an opportunity to incite division, create animosity, and promote their own agendas. From what seems to be based on ideological differences, Biblical interpretation, or just a disdain for people because whatever is different, what seems in disharmony

with their respective opinion, or that which is interpreted as wrongful needs to be removed. Their behavior shows just how easy it is to lift up differences and use the difference as an excuse for promoting division and seeking only those who are in agreement. It is surprisingly easy to mold people into cookie-cutter groups.

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.”

We do not all think alike, act alike, or even view God alike. The Christian community is one body with many members that finds its unity in baptism and its diversity in the incredible variety that is the manifestation of the Spirit. We were not meant to be alike in every way. Later in this chapter Paul will use the metaphor of a body to make his point. Not everyone is the head, or the feet, or the heart. God calls a many to come together in order to make the whole.

In the midst of divisions how do we talk about Christian unity? What happens when a community's identity resides in a uniformity of commitments and not in the unity that God in Christ makes possible? Will the church be a place of building up and not tearing down, where we do not have to prescribe a paradigm of winners and losers, where we actually imagine and believe that Christ is truly present and listens in on our conversations?

It is not easy to be open to those who are different. The world history, the history of the faithful, even the Lutheran tradition is littered with the residue of those hurt and excluded all in the name of unity. It is natural for us to describe a one size fits all. Life is easier when everyone is the same, when everyone gets along, when everyone thinks and believes alike. It may be easier but certainly not better! And it certainly isn't God's will.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good

We too, like Corinth, have been called as part of one body, each given a spiritual gift (albeit a different one) for the COMMON GOOD!

AMEN

