

## “Living Into Diversity”

Today's scripture reading – the first letter to the people known as the Corinthians (from the city in Greece called Corinth) was meant to be somebody else's mail – but today we are all listening in on it.

Letters, of course, have a specific audience in mind. We usually write a letter to a particular person or group of people. The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to a group of fledgling Christians in 55 AD.

Now, I want you to imagine, for a moment, that we are those original people to whom Paul wrote this letter. Imagine that none of us here this morning has been a practicing Christian for more than five years. Not I, the pastor, nor any of us here today. Nobody! We are all brand new Christians. And on top of that, there are no schools or seminaries to help us out. There are no denominations to give us guidance and support or to tell us how to become organized to run a church. We've all heard about Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, from a street preacher named Paul. Paul stayed with us for about a year and a half, teaching us about what it means to follow Jesus as Lord, gathering us together to get our church going. But then Paul leaves! He just up and leaves us and goes off to start a new church in some other city. We're on our own, except for a letter from Paul sent every now and then. That's what it was like to be a Christian in 55 AD.

There are no fancy hymnals like we have today. There is no Christmas Eve Candlelight service, because the holiday we call Christmas hasn't been invented yet. No Hallelujah Chorus, no Bach or Gospel music, or standards

like Amazing Grace. What on earth will the congregation sing? They're going to have to come up with a repertoire on their very own.

There are no liturgical colors, no lectionary readings to guide our worship; in fact, no Gospels are written yet; no New Testament compiled; none of the traditions that tend to define worship and church life for us today have been invented.

We are all just five years into being Christians...yet, we do have a clear Statement of Faith, but it has only three words in it, and according to Paul they are: "Jesus is Lord." That's it!

Have you ever wondered what it means when Christians say, "Jesus is Lord?" In 55 AD, only Caesar was called "Lord." The Empire of Rome was in charge, and to say that Caesar was Lord meant that faith and allegiance were owed to Caesar.

When Paul traveled around the Roman Empire, he rejected that premise and said, "No! Not Caesar. Jesus is my Lord!" He claimed that a Jewish peasant, who was executed by Caesar, and by crucifixion as a common criminal in the middle of two other criminals, is the world's true Lord. This Jesus was the one chosen by God as the "Lord" who should command our faith and allegiance and ultimately our love! And the followers of the crucified and "risen Jesus" began to live as if Jesus was their Lord and not the "oppressive power, politics, and corrupting values" of Ceasar in Rome. It was a totally radical and counter-cultural thing to say that "Jesus is Lord."

It must have been a wild adventure for those first Christians. They were pioneers as they went along, guided by the "Holy Spirit of God." It was all

new. They had just a few familiar things to guide them. They had the stories of the Old Testament (Torah). They had the water of their baptism. They had familiar bread and wine for their new practice of sharing The Lord's Supper together.

But the major ingredient that they had, that empowered and energized and created a new community where previously there was none, was the “Holy Spirit” that came to them on 'Pentecost.’’ And that was all they needed! That was enough to create the Christian Church. And Paul wrote to these early Christians to help them figure out the details of how to be the Church. Who said, the Devil is in the details?! Not Paul!

One of the greatest challenges they faced was the theme of variety and diversity that we find addressed by Paul in this letter. The church in Corinth was incredibly diverse. They came from different ethnic and racial groups, and from different economic classes. Some of them were slaves, and some of them were free. Some were Jews, and some were Greeks. This wasn't a church where everyone looked alike, or shared the same social circles, or the same standard of living. Paul's letter was written to a very diverse, cosmopolitan, urban congregation. And he encourages them in their diversity much like the Protestant Christian Church does today. Paul even says that their diversity, as frustrating as it can be sometimes, is actually a gift from God. Diversity is a sign of spirituality. Paul says there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit behind them; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord behind them, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

Three times Paul uses the word variety to describe the work of God. Variety! Variety! Variety! All coming from one God. God loves variety! And yet, for some flawed reason, so many people tend to feel threatened by variety and diversity. Often we tend to feel most comfortable with what is familiar, predictable, and the same, especially when it comes to people. Very often we prefer to be around people who are just like us! But, we must remember that it is human beings that create division out of diversity – not God! We create the White Church and the Black Church; we divide Gentile and Jew, and we create designations like Gay/Straight and Immigrant/Citizen. And yet, the church in 55 AD was just as divided in its diversity as it is in 2018. So Paul had to engage them in a “sacred conversation on diversity” - similar to what we've done in the UCC, my denominational background, around topics like race relations and human sexuality. Remember Paul clearly and eloquently reminds them that variety and diversity are actually gifts from God. In this time of the year, the summer season, all we have to do is look at all the beautiful, abundant life breaking out into the world around us to know that God passionately loves diversity. How does the song go: *“Let me tell you about the birds and the bees and the flowers and the trees and the moon up above, and a thing called love...”* Yes, God loves variety, diversity, bio-diversity, all woven into one interdependent life form, one Holy Creation!

When Paul writes his letter to help those five-year-old Christians in Corinth who are struggling with what makes them different, he reminds them that the very thing they're struggling with is a good thing! And that is

important for us to remember when the U.S. national media keeps stirring up division: political division, economic division, social division, religious and spiritual division.

Today “spirituality” is big business in America, and all over the world. And much of it is focused on our private, spiritual journeys, finding our own individual path. But God is not interested in giving us private, spiritual experiences just for our own sake. Our experiences of God always come to us for something greater than our own self-interest, or self-gratification. The Apostle Paul says, “To each is given the gift of the Spirit” for the common good. Check it out: When God's spirit is at work in you and in me, the end result will be lives that are contributing to the “common good” of all.

Paul uses the image of a human body to describe the church. It is a powerful and empowering image. We're made up of fingers and toes, eyes and ears, teeth and bones, and organs and muscles. Each part is different and varied and unique, and yet each part only makes sense, and only finds its reason for being, when it is working for the “common good” of the whole body. A finger or an eye, detached and lying alone on the floor is useless – and creepy! But when our parts are connected and interconnected, we thrive and live healthy, abundant lives.

It is God who creates unity in the midst of diversity, in our bodies and in our world. If Paul were writing today, I think he might not use the image of a human body, but rather an “ecosystem.” There is unimaginable biodiversity on our planet, and we are just finally coming to understand how intimately it is all connected. Botanists have discovered over 20,000

different orchids. An orchid depends upon a whole ecosystem, a whole web of diverse life, to thrive and survive in the wild. Because of that interdependence, orchids are more vulnerable than other species to extinction. And many are going extinct, according to the American Orchid Society, because of loss of habitat. Most of that loss is due to human deforestation in order to raise more beef cattle for the world market.

Does it matter when a species of orchid goes extinct because of human action? Does it matter when a small, beautiful, vulnerable part of God's creation disappears because we want to eat more hamburgers? These are ethical questions that many Christians and practitioners of other faiths are struggling to answer in 2018.

Jesus said that God is concerned about wildflowers, the wild lilies of the field. But why does God love variety in creation so much, when it makes life so complicated and difficult for us? Wouldn't it have been easier if everything were just beige and if we didn't have to care about whether our consumption of hamburgers had an effect on orchids in the Amazon. Why did God have to make a world where diversity and unity need to go hand in hand for the very survival of the planet Earth? I don't know, except that I think the answer to that question goes to the very heart of who God is.

In Christianity, we think of God as Trinity – Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. The God who is three, and yet one, is a God whose very nature is diversity and unity. God created a world that would bring forth diverse life and diverse people with diverse gifts, and God intends all of that wonderful variety of life to work together for the “common good” - because that is what

God is like!

Our diversity – human diversity – is meant to teach us what it truly means to love as God loves. And God loves diversity!

This ancient letter to the Corinthians, written in 55 AD, can give us great hope in the year 2018. Paul said that all the diverse gifts that God gives us are activated by one and the same Spirit.

The Greek word Paul used for “activate” is the word “energeo” - in English it is “energize.” It is where our word “energy” comes from. God created our beautiful world and blessed it, and it is activated and runs on energy.

We are all aware of the fossil fuel energy challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We can solve that challenge when we recognize that it is really God's Spirit that is the true source of all energy. And God's Spirit is clean, renewable, unlimited, and sustainable! Today new possibilities of solar energy, wind energy, geo-thermal energy, hydro-energy, a wonderful diversity of clean, sustainable energy sources are capable of fazing out our over-reliance on fossil fuels, that science has shown to have many negative side effects, like many drugs.

At the beginning of this sermon, I asked you to imagine what it must have been like for those first Christians two thousand years ago, when everything was new, when they were figuring everything out as they went along, led by God's Spirit and the Spirit of the “Risen Christ.” Today, we are on a similar voyage of discovery of what it means for us to be the Church in our diverse and complicated time.

There is a fresh wind blowing – God's “Ruach,” God's Breath, God's Holy Spirit, and it is pure and clean. It is infinite and renewable and sustainable; and if you and I will open our sails and let it carry us, God's Spirit, God's “Ruach” will take us on adventures of living, finding unity out of diversity and sustainable lifestyles that we have not yet even imagined, that are life giving rather than life threatening. We must remember (John 10:10) where Jesus said, “I have come so that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Amen

Amen