

“The Blessed Tie That Binds”:  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for January 24<sup>th</sup> 2016 (Third Sunday after Epiphany)  
by Foster Freed

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12: 12-31a

Let's begin...let's begin with a bit of a re-cap!

Off the top, it's worth noting that we seem to have found ourselves—and this, quite frankly, is a development that has taken me by surprise—we seem to have found ourselves, part way through a series of sermons built around the person and work of the Holy Spirit. And yes: I mean it when I say this turn of events has taken even me, the preacher, by surprise: because it did not occur to me way back in December (when I began choosing these texts) that we would find ourselves so firmly planted in a series of meditations on the Spirit. But yes! Despite the fact that Pentecost Sunday is roughly 4 months away, the Holy Spirit has most certainly landed and is currently front and centre in our deliberations.

Two weeks ago...two weeks ago the Spirit arrived courtesy of an odd little episode from the Acts of the Apostles: an episode in which we learn of a group of Samaritans who have been baptized into the Lord Jesus, but are not yet recipients of the Holy Spirit, an omission the Church Elders from Jerusalem quickly set out to remedy. And yes: the point of that story, at least as I tried to decipher it, the point is that the Church is anything but a Jesus museum, but rather a living breathing organic community that is being shaped by the Spirit to represent the living Christ in the midst of our ever changing world. That was two weeks ago. That was followed last Sunday...

...followed last Sunday by our hearing the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul's first letter to the Church in Corinth, a hearing which, much like this morning's hearing of the second half of that 12<sup>th</sup> chapter, appears to have been inspired by the fact that the Christians in Corinth, far from being innocent of the presence of the Holy Spirit, couldn't get enough of the Holy Spirit: in particular couldn't get enough of one particular manifestation of the Spirit: ecstatic speech or as we like to call it nowadays, “speaking in tongues”. Such was the delight taken by those members of the community who did speak in tongues, that they tended to look down their noses at what they came to regard as the second-class members of the community, namely those who did not speak in tongues. And so—no surprise here—Paul begins his rebuttal by emphasizing the great variety of spiritual gifts, insisting that all the gifts are important, and that all of the gifts (in their splendid variety) were to be honoured and celebrated and incorporated into the life of the faith-community. Variety...last week's theme was variety, variety which in the matter of “spiritual gifts” as in so many other matters proves to be the spice of life! Amen! Amen and Hallelujah!

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Well! Perhaps it ought to come as no surprise that Paul, having begun by emphasizing the diversity of the gifts of God, makes haste to speak in terms of the unity of purpose by which those gifts need to be ordered if they are to serve well within the Church, within what he quickly comes to speak of as the Body of Christ. As Paul so rightly insists:

*For 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.  
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.*

Two short sentences...but in the course of those two short sentences, Paul manages to use the word “one” on five different occasions: one as in the number that symbolizes unity. Nor, I hasten to add, is he content to rest with that:

Having made that general point, Paul proceeds to develop at great length his analogy of the body, and does so with considerable skill and humour. *If 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. And 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. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?*

Hard indeed! Hard indeed to see how we might even begin to argue with Paul’s logic; it seems pretty unassailable! Nor does it take a rocket scientist to see how Paul’s logic applies to the Church of Jesus Christ. Just as a body requires both eyes and ears, so does the Church require a variety of gifts that work together in unity! The unity of the God who sends to us the one Spirit, producing a variety of gifts, gifts which for all their variety must still work together in the unity of that Spirit: this morning that most clearly is our theme. The Spirit: the one Spirit that binds us together...that ties us in a deeper unity than any unity we ourselves might be able to manufacture left to our own devices. Our oneness! Our unity under God...our unity in Christ...our unity through the Spirit! Surely such unity is the quality without which a faith community’s life could not get off the ground...and yes, such unity is surely one of the key litmus tests of whether a Christian faith-community has its priorities straight and its life heading in the right direction. That much...surely that much seems basic and clear.

Then again!

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One of the wonderful things about reading scripture is that, generally speaking, you don't often get very far in any particular text from just about any particular section of the Bible, without bumping into something very peculiar. That's certainly the case...certainly the case with this morning's reading.

Here we are knee deep in a conversation with the Apostle Paul, in which he is telling us about the need for unity in the life of the Church. And here we are, discovering the way in which he develops an exceptionally thoughtful analogy to help us get our heads around the importance of unity, an analogy in which Paul helpfully develops a comparison between the way in which the human body requires its various organs to work in harmony and the way in which a human community such as the Church requires its various people (bringing with them their various spiritual gifts) to place those gifts at the service of the whole, at the service of the body itself. All of that is important, all of that is marvellous, but frankly—once you think about it—none of that comes as much of a surprise. But then Paul has to go and spoil it, by developing the analogy perhaps a step further than any of us might have dared to develop it were we the ones crafting this letter.

*The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.*

And yes, you heard him correctly, if you heard Paul to be speaking here of our private parts, our sexual organs. *Those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this.* And you know: I suspect some of us will find ourselves wishing that Paul had stopped a sentence or two earlier...

...as young people nowadays might put it: "Too much information, Paul!"

...others of us, and I confess I include myself in this, others may find ourselves suspecting that this part of the analogy may well be the most important part of Paul's argument in this section of the letter: the point he's been driving at from the start. Because the bottom line is that we human beings are hierarchical by nature. Indeed: there are cultures where the first and most basic thing you do when you meet a new contact, is exchange business cards with them...and trust me: in those cultures, if your card makes it appear that you hold a lower rank within your organization than the rank the person you're meeting holds in their organization, you'll quickly discover that they won't have the time of

day for you. At best...at best...they'll introduce you to someone in their organization lower-down-the rung than they are, someone who perhaps won't find it beneath their dignity to do business with you. Unpleasant, I'm afraid, but true: true not only of specific cultures, but of a tendency we all harbour within our own twisted little hearts. But here's the thing.

The Gospel...the Gospel of Jesus Christ...begins with a man, hanging on a Cross...executed as a common criminal...opening his arms wide on that Cross to welcome all who seek to find a welcome in his arms. Be clear that crucifixion is not only one of the most brutal and painful forms of capital punishment human ingenuity has managed to devise, it is also one of the most humiliating ways of carrying out a death-sentence, featuring a crucified body hanging naked on a Cross, utterly exposed to the derision of those who despise them. At its heart, the Cross perfectly personifies our human need to expose, humiliate and marginalize those who have fallen outside of our good graces...pushing them first to the boundary of this world, and then when death overtakes them, pushing over the edge so that we need not deign to look at them again!

And Paul's point, quite simply, is that a community of faith founded upon the Gospel—a community of faith that has come face-to-face with the Crucified Christ—is a community of faith that ought to become suspicious of all hierarchy including its own hierarchy: a community of faith that ought to stop ranking people in terms of their contribution, their rank, their dignity...a community of faith that ought to recognize that sometimes the most profound gifts, the most profound offerings, come to us in forms we scarcely recognize, come to us from people with whom we are reluctant to associate let alone to honour, and yet come to us from people who provide the real glue that holds us together....people who personify the same Spirit that Christ came to bring to us, people who embody the genuine tie that binds us as one in Christ.

*"Blest be the tie that binds  
our hearts in Christian love,  
the unity of heart and mind  
is like to that above."*

It goes without saying that Christ **is** the tie that binds: though it should be underlined that the Christ who binds us as one is the Christ who did not find it beneath his dignity to call unlettered fishermen into his ranks, who did not find it beneath his dignity to touch and heal the leper, who did not find it beneath his dignity to serve at table, who did not find it beneath his dignity to permit a broken woman to anoint his feet with her tears, and yes, who did not, in turn, find it beneath his dignity on the very night of his arrest to stoop down and wash the feet of his friends. And when we speak of the Spirit, when we yearn for the Spirit, when we cry out for the Spirit and for the gifts of the Spirit, you can rest assured that it is His Spirit, Christ's Spirit of which we speak, for which we yearn, for which we cry out. No other spirit need apply...and every spirit other than the

self-giving Spirit of Christ can feel free to depart from this place at the earliest possible juncture. That our unity....

...that our unity in this place, may be marked by the very Spirit that guided the One we follow: the One who calls us to service, to generosity, to kindness, to humility and always...always...always: who calls us to lives of love.

May it be so! In Jesus' name! Amen!!