

“The Spice of Life!”
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for January 17th 2016
by Foster Freed

1st Corinthians 12: 1-11

There is likely no New Testament document more complex than the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Christian community he had helped to found in the Greek city of Corinth: none more complex and, to be fair, none with more to offer by way of helping us to understand something of the life of the earliest Christian communities. And yes: 1st Corinthians' complexity and its rich content are both grounded in the very nature of the letter, which involves Paul's point by point response to a series of questions raised by the community, as well as his point by point response to things he has learned—through the grapevine as it were—about life in the Corinthian Church, things that have raised profound concerns for Paul. And so, yes, the fact that the letter gives us a taste of that sort of dialogue between an Apostle and one of his communities is what makes this letter so rich for us some 2000 years after the fact. But of course...

...well, of course it is also the case that the complexity of the letter—better still the complexity of any attempt at making sense out of the letter—owe their complexity to that same basic fact, namely that 1st Corinthians involves a series of answers provided by Paul: the challenge being that we don't have direct access to the other end of the conversation. It's sort of like that maddening experience when you're in the room with your spouse as they try to speak on the telephone concerning a matter that affects you both. It can be frustrating trying to figure out just what is being said by the person on the other end of the phone that is generating the things being said on your end of the phone. And yes: what we have in 1st Corinthians is half of a lively conversation, and a wee bit of reconstruction is needed.

That's certainly true of the section of this letter we'll be pondering this morning, as well as the next two Sundays. It's here, in this section of the letter—specifically chapters 12, 13 & 14—that Paul has a great deal to say about the spiritual gifts that were very much in evidence, not only in Corinth but throughout the Churches now scattered on both sides of the Mediterranean. Given that Paul chooses to devote three full chapters to his concerns with spiritual gifts, we know that this was no small issue in his eyes: in other words, he went to great lengths to try to correct what he regarded as the Corinthians misunderstanding about spiritual gifts. The problem, of course—given that we don't have the letter they may have sent to Paul—is that we don't absolutely know just what that misunderstanding might have been. We have to do some detective work. And so, leaning on some of the best scholarship around this letter, let me share with you what I think the problem was in the Corinthian Church.

* * * * *

Ecstatic speech! That is the heart of the issue that has Paul so worked up here. Ecstatic speech...or what we call speaking in tongues. And yes, as I pointed out last Sunday when the Holy Spirit was also front and centre, many of you who have been part of Church life in this part of Vancouver Island may well be no strangers to ecstatic speech, no strangers to speaking-in-tongues. Indeed! Based on what Paul goes on to say in the 14th chapter of this letter, the sort of ecstatic speech with which Paul was familiar...with which the Corinthian Church was familiar...is not unlike the sort of ecstatic speech with which those of you who have ever worshipped in a Pentecostal or Charismatic Church will likely be familiar. It tends, much of the time though by no means all of the time, to take the form of a gentle, ecstatic babbling that sounds almost like a child cooing...and it generally involves a sense of ecstasy on the part of the one doing the babbling: almost a sense that God has seized you and is speaking through you.

It's a lovely thing...at any rate, can be a lovely thing for those experiencing that sort of ecstatic moment. And that, right there, appears to be the issue: because it is such a special experience and because we human beings tend to crave experiences, especially those that leave us with the deep conviction that God is alive, that God is afoot!...

...because we human beings tend to crave such experiences and value such experiences so highly, we have a tendency to permit them to trump all of the other manifestations of the Spirit. That happens in modern day charismatic renewals...and if this interpretation of 1st Corinthians is correct, it was clearly happening way back in Paul's day. And that...or so I am convinced...is why Paul chose to devote such a large chunk of this letter to addressing spiritual gifts.

Nor is it surprising that Paul begins his lengthy argument by making two points: the points that occupy the reading we heard from the first half of the epistle's 12th chapter. For starters...and in some ways this seems so obvious that it is almost surprising Paul thought he had to spell it out but perhaps he did need to spell it out...

...Paul basically says: that if you are in some sort of ecstasy that leads you to cry out—"Jesus be damned"—then the spirit that's causing you to say that is most definitely not the Spirit of God, no matter how convinced you may be that it is God's Spirit! On the other hand, if you—in the most sober non-ecstatic of ways—insist that "Jesus is Lord", then it is the Holy Spirit animating your speech, even if you are speaking as calmly and as coolly as a Math prof explaining basic concepts in Algebra. That's how Paul begins his argument. But then he moves on to the part I want really to ponder this morning: a section in which he makes the point, over and over again, that there are a variety of gifts.

Not just ecstatic speech...not just speaking in tongues...but a variety of gifts. Variety...as in the spice of life to which this sermon title alludes! A variety of gifts...and yes...a variety of people...a variety of people to whom those gifts have been entrusted. As Paul so insistently puts it:

*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.*

No cookie-cutter world for this God! No cookie-cutter “people of God” for this God! Varieties of gifts! Varieties of services! And yes: varieties of those on the receiving end of the gifts, and the sharing end of the services. And thank God...thank God for that. How boring this world...how boring this church...were we all cut from the same mould.

* * * * *

I want to point to another word...a word that can sometimes make us uncomfortable...but a word that does appear in at least one translation of this text. *All these [gifts] are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.* Individually...that’s the word I have in mind. Individually...as in each individual: not just all of us together...but each of us as individuals.

And I think our tendency...perhaps because we Canadians are a little suspicious of rugged American individualism...and perhaps because we United Church types are (as our name suggests) highly aware of the unity to which Christ calls us...I think our tendency is to be suspicious of words that seem to place the individual on any sort of pedestal. And yes: at a worship service that will, at its end, give way to an informal congregational meeting, it is obviously in my own best interest to remind all of us that we need to be working and pulling in the same direction. All of that should go without saying. Nevertheless!

Individual. Individually. Even individualism, rightly understood! These ought not to be dirty words in our vocabulary. For while it is true that the heart of the Old Testament involves God’s relationship with a people—the people Israel—and that the heart of the New Testament involves the expansion of that relationship to include people from every tribe and race, the fact remains that the call to Israel begins with a word spoken to one individual (call him Abraham) and that the new covenant to which we belong begins with the even more striking individual faithfulness of one of Abraham’s heirs (call him Jesus). The point being that while it most certainly is the case that the Church is a community...a communion of like-minded and like-hearted souls...what the Church most certainly is not is a cult of conformity! Anytime Christian leaders expect their

Church to resemble such a cult, you can take it as given that something has gone off the rails. Again, to repeat Paul's trenchant warning:

*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.*

The same God, definitely! The same Spirit, without a doubt! The same God, but activating different gifts...gifts differing...in each...and in all! And yes: while it certainly is the case that we sometimes fall into the trap of worshipping a God who is too small, a God who fails to see and act upon the big picture...it's also the case that we sometimes fall into the opposite trap of worshipping a God who is too big...too big and way too remote. Off there in the distance...out there at a disturbingly vast remove: certainly far too big...and far too remote...to care about the likes of you or me.

Well. Suffice it to say...suffice it to say that there's no Gospel to be found in such a god. Yes: God is big enough to accomplish God's purposes. But God is small enough...detail oriented enough...to care about the Spirit's gifts to you and to you and to you and to me. God is interested not merely in the big picture, but in addressing persons, speaking to persons, calling out persons, gifting persons: and in the process of doing all of that, creating persons: individuals if you please, individuals in whom God's own image shines, persons who have been gifted with God's own dignity...persons who are being loved into completeness...and yes, persons—individuals—being equipped: that through their gifts, their spiritual gifts, they might touch and heal and love one another.

When push comes to shove that, quite simply, is what we are called to this day: as we worship and as we work. Called to ask of God that gifts of power and love might be lavished on this faith community! Called to ask of God that those entrusted with those gifts might not slip into an "aw shucks" false modesty routine, but might own and cultivate the gifts that have been given. And that yes, we might use those gifts generously, courageously, lovingly: and all in Jesus name!

May it be so! Amen!!