

I Cor. 13
31 Jan. 10

“Diversity Is from God”

OK, this week, rather than working my way around to it, I want to start with the main point. Here it is: we are enriched by diversity in the Bible, among humankind, and even within ourselves. We are enriched even by those things and people which make us uncomfortable.

If we stick to those parts of Scripture we agree with, we miss a chunk of what God is trying to say to us. And maybe we drift off into sectarian error and misunderstanding. If we get stuck in our own narrow substratum of culture and opinion, we just get more and more unreasonable and ignorant and no good to much of anybody. And even within ourselves—now, I’m not saying there aren’t parts of our nature that shouldn’t be suppressed; all of us have them—but even within ourselves, if we only allow one part of our personality to develop, we miss out on a lot and become boring we are enriched by the diversity in the Bible, among humankind, and even within ourselves. To deny any of these diversities is to set aside part of the Word of God, part of God’s Creation, or part of the way God made us.

But diversity and the uncertainty that comes with it are not what we usually crave. We crave agreement and like-mindedness. We segregate ourselves racially and politically. Generally, whites want to live in white neighborhoods, blacks want to live in black neighborhoods, etc. There are few racially diverse churches. And it has been often said that Sunday morning is the most racially segregated time in America. We’re more comfortable with “our own kind,” however we define it.

Politically, our churches are much more diverse. But that’s because we shy away from talking politics at church. We don’t talk politics at church because we judge that would divide us. We prefer to be among our own kind, and we tend to think that our kind is more right and more faithful and closer to God. And maybe even more favored by God. Hence the reaction to Jesus in today’s Gospel by his hometown folks, who don’t like being reminded that God doesn’t always put them first. My observation is that everybody does this, liberal and conservative alike.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he was writing to a church that was deeply divided on all kinds of fronts. There were factional parties. Some said I belong to Paul; others I belong to Apollos; others I belong to Peter. They were divided on economic lines. When they came together for worship and Eucharist and a meal, some had plenty to eat and some had very little. They were divided into factions over spiritual gifts. They were divided on matters of doctrine and morals. It was a mess. And instead of embracing diversity and learning from it, the diverse groups segregated themselves into competing camps.

Part of Paul’s purpose in writing to them was to keep the church together. Paul addresses the disunity, disjointedness, and disparate factions he finds in Corinth in three ways. First, Paul writes about spiritual gifts. He says that while there are many different kinds of gifts, they all come from the same spirit. So comparing ourselves to others is a waste of time. Rather, we are

simply to use the gifts we have been given and learn from others who are different from us how to be more spiritually well-rounded. We are enriched by our diversity.

Next, Paul reminds us that there are many parts to this body of Christ to which we belong. What matters is not what part we are but that we work together with the other parts as one body sharing the one loaf and cup at the center of our life together as the body of Christ. It takes diverse parts to make up a body. Without them the body doesn't function. Lose any part, and the body is diminished.

Then he says is, "I will show you a still more excellent way." In the part of the letter read today Paul describes in full, loving detail that more excellent way. He has a lot to say about this more excellent way, but he sums up this full, rich description with one single word. That word is love.

Most of us think of love as a feeling. As with most feelings, the feeling of love comes and goes, and so we fall in love and fall out again. That is not how the word love is used in the Bible. In the Bible love is a way of acting and being. And it comes not from a feeling but from a commitment and a decision. We love because we decide to act in a loving way.

When Paul describes the more excellent way of living together as Christians, he does not use feeling words. He uses action words. When we choose the more excellent way and love one another, we do not focus on our spiritual gifts or our prophetic powers or our great faith or our wonderful stewardship. Rather we are patient with others and kind to others. We are not envious of their gifts or their glory, and we are not boastful about ours. We do not rejoice that we are made to look better when others fail, but rejoice when they succeed. When we choose the more excellent way, we bear all things, believe all things, endure all things. This kind of love never ends.

From where in the world can such love come? I have several answers. all of which are true, and all of which must be present if we are to love in the way about which St. Paul writes. The first answer is that such love comes not from a feeling but from a commitment. If we are to love the way Paul urges us to love, then we will have to be firmly committed to doing so, because there will be plenty of times when we don't feel like it. People will do all kinds of things that will test our commitment to love. At such times we will have to decide whether to be loving or not.

The second answer is that such love comes from maturity. That's what Paul is getting at when he writes, "When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways." If we are to love the way Paul urges us to, we'll have to put some things behind us. Childish things like petty competition, grudges, and trying to hang on to our own little fiefdoms.

There is a third and final answer to the question, "From where in the world can such love come?" And while commitment and maturity are certainly necessary, this last answer is the most important.. "Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, *even as I have been fully known.*" To know another person fully, to understand another fully, to love another fully, completely--these are impossibly tall orders for us in this life. And to *be* known and understood

and loved fully and completely--what a divine thought that is. And, of course, that's just what it is, a divine thought. It's also a divine action. For in Jesus, God made with us, God fully knows, fully understands, and fully loves us. God loves us in a birth and a life and a death and a resurrection. God loves us in the Spirit and in the baptism and in the communing and the forgiving. God loves us here in this faith community. God loves us completely, fully, eternally. God even loves our diversity. It enriches us. It's how God made us.