Sunday, January 22, 1989
DIVERSITY AND UNITY
I Corinthians 12:12-31

The congregation in Corinth had its problems. It was a divided church, and many people know from personal experience that there is nothing worse than a church fight. In the Corinthian fight, there were more than two sides. The congregation was divided into a number of factions.

Some members of the church were saying, 'All things are permissible.' By that, they meant that sexual conduct is as morally indifferent as eating. Another group claimed that since they had ecstatic experiences, their faith was somehow deeper and that God's spirit was working in them more than in those who did not have such experiences. And there was a debate among others about the meaning of the resurrection. There was also disagreement about Holy Communion, how it should be served, and its meaning.

To make matters even worse, some members of the church were saying that the personal gifts or talents they possessed were more important than the talents or personal gifts which others had. One member would say, 'I have the gift of prophecy, so I'm better than you,' or 'I have the gift of speaking in tongues, and this means that God is working through me more than through those who do not have this gift.'

The Corinthian congregation was made up of people from many different religious backgrounds. It was a highly diverse collection of people. Some came from a Jewish religious background; others from different sorts of Greek religions, and still others had no religious background to speak of.

Undoubtedly, some of these people who had joined the Corinthian church had earth-shaking, born-again, and very emotional religious experiences, while others did not.

The Apostle Paul, who had organized this congregation and was still considered to be its spiritual leader, had no fault to find with the zeal and enthusiasm of some of its members. Yet, he also knew that such zeal has need of correction and direction and discipline if it is to be saved from unspiritual excess.

The Apostle Paul also explains that spirituality is not one uniform experience that is separate from all other areas of life. The spiritual is not in contrast to the material and the intellectual. Manifestations of the Spirit of God are to be found in wide varieties of conduct and expressions. God works through the gifts and talents which each one of us has.

Thus Paul reminds the congregation in Corinth that there can be a diversity and variety of gifts, but all come from the same Spirit of God. Listen to his words: 'Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.' So diversity and unity are not contradictory but rather can complement each other.

To illustrate his point, the Apostle Paul used the metaphor of the human body as an example. He reminds us that our physical bodies are made up of many different parts. And no one part is more important than another. Is your ear more important than your eye? Or suppose your

whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? We need all the diverse parts of our body working together if we are to be a healthy individual.

Application to Our Lives

What does all this have to do with us?

Affirming and Celebrating Diversity

It means, first of all, that as Christians, we are to affirm and celebrate diversity. This is not as easy to do as we might think, both in church and outside the church.

In our culture and within the Christian faith, there have been two themes that have been in conflict most of the time. One theme is openness, generosity, inclusiveness — a spirit that affirms diversity. The other theme is intolerance, suspiciousness, and conformity — a way of thinking that says, unless you look like me, dress like me, act like me, and believe exactly the same way that I believe, I want nothing to do with you, and neither does God.

I've often wondered what there is in us human beings that drives us toward conformity. What is it in us that makes us suspicious and even afraid of people who are different from us?

In 1910, when Branch Rickey was a coach for Ohio Wesleyan, the team went to South Bend, Indiana, for a game. The hotel management registered the coach and team but refused to assign a room to a black player named Charley Thomas. In those days, college athletics had few black players. Finally, Mr. Rickey suggested that a cot be put in his own room, which he would then share with the unwanted guest. The hotel manager wasn't happy about the idea, but he gave in.

Years later, Branch Rickey told the story of the misery of the black athlete with whom he had shared a room. He remembered that Thomas couldn't sleep. He sat on that cot and was silent for a long time. Then he began to cry, tears he couldn't hold back. His whole body shook with emotion. Rickey sat and watched him, not knowing what to do until Thomas began tearing at one hand with the other — just as if he were trying to scratch the skin off his hands with his fingernails. Rickey asked him what he was trying to do to himself.

'It's my hands,' he sobbed, 'they're black. If only they were white, I'd be as good as anybody, wouldn't I, Mr. Rickey?'

'Charley,' Mr. Rickey said, 'you are as good as anybody now, and the day will come when you won't have to be white for other white people to know that and for you to know that.' Unfortunately, that day is still not here for many people.

Branch Rickey never forgot the incident, and it was the memory of it that gave him the motivation to bring the first black baseball player into the major league, Jackie Robinson, and it helped him to endure the threats and hostility.

We need to celebrate and affirm diversity.

Some of you may remember the bestselling novel of years ago, Jonathan Livingston Seagull. In that story, Jonathan begins to practice flying in different ways from the other seagulls, and

his parents are very much dismayed. ‘Why, Jon, why?’ his mother asked, ‘Why is it so hard to be like the rest of the flock, Jon?’

As Jonathan continues to practice and to perfect new ways of flying, he is one day called before the Gull Council. He thinks he is going to be honored for learning some new and different ways of flying as a gull. But no, he is to be punished for trying to be different.

‘Jonathan Livingston Seagull,’ says the Elder, ‘stand to center for shame in the sight of your fellow gulls.’ ‘For his reckless irresponsibility,’ the solemn voice intones, ‘violating the dignity and tradition of the gull family...life is the unknown and the unknowable, except that we are put into this world to eat, to stay alive as long as we possibly can. Nothing more.’

Jonathan tries to reason with the Council. ‘My brothers,’ he cries, ‘who is more responsible than a gull who finds and follows a meaning, a higher purpose for life? For a thousand years we have scrabbled after fish heads, but now we have a reason to live, to learn, to discover, to be free. Give me one chance, let me show you what I’ve found.’

The flock of gulls might as well have been stone. ‘The brotherhood is broken,’ the gulls intoned together, and with one accord, they solemnly closed their ears and turned their backs on him.

A philosopher named Socrates had a similar problem many years ago. He dared to be different. He asked probing questions about traditions, practices, and beliefs and was finally put to death. We have trouble tolerating persons who are different from us.

Yet, our Christian faith emphasizes over and over again that we are not to try to do away with diversity and difference; rather, we are to celebrate, affirm, appreciate, and learn from diversity. Other people’s gifts can make up for those gifts we ourselves lack.

Jesus said, ‘In God’s house, there are many rooms,’ indicating that there is room for all varieties of people. In another place, Jesus said to his disciples who wanted to make all of his followers conform, ‘I have many sheep who are not of this fold.’

God asks us to drop our pretensions of wanting everybody to be just like us, and we do not have to waste so much of our effort trying to be like other people. Equality is not sameness or conformity. We are to attempt instead to enlarge the range of our sympathies so as to delight in every cultural and racial difference.

Celebrate diversity! Think of it — what most astonishes and excites us in the whole mysterious gift of life is diversity. No two human beings are the same. The tiniest snowflake, the most distant star, the intricately veined leaf of a tree — each is unique. From jackrabbit to giraffe, from crocodile to swan, from tiger to hummingbird, nature delights in varieties of form and phenomena. The rainbow is beautiful because it is made up of so many different colors.

It’s depressing when the human effort moves toward suppressing variety. In law, religion, politics, technology, economics, and education, the greatest danger is the tendency toward a deadening sameness, toward a loss of diversity — usually for the sake of control.

Developing and Sharing Our Gifts

In addition to celebrating and affirming diversity, each one of us needs to find out what our own gifts are and then develop those gifts. If you have a gift of teaching, then be a teacher, or if you

have a gift for music, then develop that gift. Or perhaps you have the gift of administration, or of hospitality, or any one of a number of other gifts. Each one of us has one or more gifts that can be put to good use for the good of all.

Too frequently, we ignore some of our best gifts and want a gift or talent that someone else has. Furthermore, rather than celebrating our own uniqueness, we want to be like everyone else.

I think that one of the most beautiful sights in our time is the rebirth of cultural ethnic festivals like the Czech Festival in Wilber, Nebraska. In other cities and towns, there are Swedish Festivals, German Festivals, Irish Celebrations, and more.

In the deepest sense, the metaphor “melting pot” is not a good one for describing the United States. For “melting pot” seems to indicate that we will all blend together and there will no longer be diversity.

This nation is more like a patchwork quilt made up of all kinds of blocks and patterns and materials, yet all stitched together into one nation — together we have both diversity and unity.

The Apostle Paul said that we are all part of the body of Christ and individually members of it. We do not lose our individuality, yet together we are united for a higher purpose.

Finding God in Others

Thirdly, Jesus in the Gospels reminds us that we can find God already present in the other person who is different from us, and in religious experiences that may be different from ours, no matter how strange or unfamiliar that other’s ideas or religious practices may seem. Christ meets us in and through the stranger; in and through those who are different.

The good news is that God loves us in our beautiful diversity. God does not compare us with one another, but rather asks how we are using whatever diverse gift or gifts we have. Amen.