Sunday, January 18, 1998
THE BEAUTY OF DIVERSITY
I Corinthians 12:1-11

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 congregational dispute, 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 religious experiences, their faith was somehow deeper and that God’s Spirit was working in them more actively 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 observed and its meaning.

To make matters worse some members of the church were saying that the personal gifts or talents they possessed were more important than the talents and personal gifts which others had. One person would say, “I have the gift of prophecy, so I’m better than you,” or another, “I have the gift of speaking in tongues and this means that God is speaking 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 the Jewish tradition, others from a variety of Greek religions and still others had no religious tradition at all.

Undoubtedly some of these people who had joined the Corinthian Church had earth-shaking, born again, spirit-filled 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, direction and discipline if it is to be saved from unspiritual excess.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthian Church was trying to explain that there is not one kind of uniform spiritual experience which is normative and which can be used as a test for validity. Furthermore, he cautioned them that the spiritual is not separate from the material and the rational. Manifestions of the Spirit of God are to be found in wide varieties of conduct and expressions. God works through the varying gifts and talents which are given to us. Furthermore, one gift is not better than another.

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 everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” So diversity and unity are not contradictory, but rather complement each other.

To illustrate his point, Paul used the metaphor of the various parts of the human body as an example. He reminded them that their physical bodies are made up of many different parts.

And no one part is more important or superior than another. “Is your ear more important than your eye?” Would it be good if your whole body were an ear? Where then would be the sense of smell? We all need the different parts of our body working together if we are to be healthy human beings.

What then does this have do with us today?

First of all, it means that as Christians, we are to affirm and celebrate diversity. God has created it. Diversity is not only a necessity; it is also beautiful. Can you imagine how boring and dull it would be to live in a world where every human being looked and acted exactly like you or me, where everyone had exactly the same gifts and abilities, where every basketball player was exactly the same weight and height and had the same skills? What would it be like to live in a city where every house or apartment was exactly the same, the same color, the same size, the same furniture — in short, where everybody and everything was equal?

We need a variety of skills and intelligences if our society is to be healthy and harmonious. I also believe that we need to broaden our definition of diversity. Usually, when we speak of a congregation or city being composed of a diverse population, we are thinking primarily in terms of a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds. We forget that we are diverse in many other ways, such as skill, ability, and intelligence.

Some of you will recall the short story that Kurt Vonnegut wrote way back in 1961, called Harrison Bergeron. The story begins, “The year was 2081, and everybody was equal. They weren’t only equal before God and the law. They were equal in every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th amendments to the Constitution and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.”

“Some things about living still weren’t quite right, though. April, for instance, still drove people crazy by not being springtime. And it was in that clammy month that the Handicapper General’s agents took George and Hazel Bergeron’s 14 year-old son, Harrison, away. It was tragic all right, but George and Hazel couldn’t think about it very hard. Hazel had perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn’t think about anything except in short bursts. And George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental handicap radio in his ear. He was required by law to wear it at all times. It was tuned to a government transmitter. Every 20 seconds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains.”

“George and Hazel were watching television. On the television screen were ballerinas. A buzzer sounded in George’s head. His thought fled in panic, like bandits from a burglar alarm. ‘That was a real pretty dance, that dance they just did,’ said Hazel.”

“‘Yup,’ said George. He tried to think a little about the ballerinas. They weren’t really very good — no better than anybody else would have been anyway. They were burdened with sashweights and bags of birdshot, and their faces were masked, so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat drug in. George was toying with the vague notion that maybe the dancers shouldn’t be handicapped. But he didn’t get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts.” Read the full story sometime.

The best-selling novel years ago was JONATHAN LIVINGSTON SEAGULL, and it had a similar theme. 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 keeps asking, “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 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.” But no chance is given.

We human beings are full of contradictions. On the one hand, we admire and appreciate diversity and the talents, skills, and abilities of others, and on the other hand, we are often intolerant and suspicious of diversity, pressing instead for conformity. We don’t like it when someone excels, does something different, or tries to find a better way.

There are those among us who blindly follow changes in fashion. Whatever is in style now, we feel we have to have it. We have a need to conform, yet we don’t like to conform. Many young people believe they must dress in the same manner as their peers. Woe to the one who stands out as being different and becomes a non-conformist.

I often wonder what it is in us that drives us toward conformity? Another way to ask the question is: what is it in us that makes us suspicious or even afraid of people who are different from us — not only those whose skin color, language, or religion is different, but those who have abilities or gifts we don’t possess? Why are we always wanting to label people, put them in categories, or bring them down to our level? Why do we set up so many artificial barriers to separate people? Why do we punish or even kill people when we perceive them as being different from us?

Is it because we have an innate fear of the unknown and are therefore afraid of people who are new to us and different? We find a certain comfort in those things that are familiar to us.

One way to begin overcoming this fear is to remember that all of us are made in the image of God, no matter how different someone may seem to be. Take it one step further and give thanks for the beauty of diversity. What a dull world it would be if all birds looked exactly alike and all warbled the same song. The rainbow is beautiful because it is made up of so many different colors.

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

Second, in addition to celebrating and giving thanks for diversity in every aspect of creation, each one of us needs to find our own unique gifts and develop them.

If you have the gift of teaching, then be a teacher. If you have the gift of music, then develop that gift. If you have the gift of administration or hospitality, or whatever your gifts may be, let your light shine. Be the best that you can be with the gifts God has given you.

One of the newer theories about human intelligence is that there are at least seven different intelligences, and these vary by individual. According to the research of Harvard University psychologist Howard Gardner, linguistic and mathematical intelligences— which much of formal schooling focuses on — are only two of them. The other five include visual and spatial intelligence, which is found in people who think in pictures and use metaphors. Musical intelligence is highly developed in performers, composers, conductors, and recording engineers. They are sensitive to pitch, rhythm, and the complex organization and emotional power of music. Kinesthetic intelligence is highly developed in dancers, athletes, inventors, surgeons, and the mechanically gifted. Interpersonal or social intelligence is well developed in politicians, teachers, religious leaders, counselors, managers, salespeople, and public relations specialists. Intrapersonal intelligence is found in novelists, counselors, philosophers, and mystics, who tend to focus inward and are highly self-motivated.

All of us have these seven intelligences, but they vary in degree from individual to individual. All are necessary for a healthy human society. Each one of us is a gifted person in his or her own way.

Too often, we ignore some of our best gifts and envy the gifts or talents others possess. Or we look down on someone who has different gifts. That's what was going on in the Corinthian congregation. Paul had to remind them that God needs all of our gifts and that God does not compare us with one another. God only wants to know what we are doing with the gifts we have been given.

The good news is that God loves each one of us in our beautiful diversity, and in the same way, we are to love each other. Amen.