

Reflection for the third Sunday after Pentecost, May 29, 2016

Based on three excerpts from Paul's letter to the Corinthians (Chapter 12, verses 1-7 "Spiritual Gifts"; verses 12-27 "The Body of Christ"; and Chapter 13: 1-13 "The Gift of Love").

Last Sunday, in keeping with celebrating Trinity Sunday, we focussed on how the forefathers' of the Christian faith struggled some 300 years after Jesus died on the cross.

What was their struggle?

To find cohesive language to describe the mystery of the Holy Trinity-that is, the three in one unity that exists in relationship between God as Father, Jesus as the Son, and the Spirit of Truth (also known promised advocate or friend).

The doctrine of the Trinity might also be described as the unity in relationship between a God we understand as **Love**, Jesus as the embodiment of that Love, or we might say **Love Incarnate**, and the Holy Spirit, **Love's Power** ever at work throughout the universe and apparent to many Christians when they gather in community.

Doctrine, however, though often a springboard to action, is not what provides us with the concrete examples we need for integrating our understanding of God's call for our lives.

With that in mind, this morning, by contrast, we have God's Word taking us back 250 or so years earlier to the time just a few decades after Jesus died on the cross.

We have heard these readings from the apostle, Paul a number of times since I first came into your midst as your newly called minister in 2014. Most recently we heard these readings during the season of Epiphany when our focus was shining a light on God's glorious presence in our midst. Prior to that they were also the readings I chose for our covenanting service in the fall of 2014.

As we anticipate hearing them read again this morning, they remind me that we are called not just into a community of friends, families, and neighbours wanting to be faithful to the work of ministry in this community.

We are also called into Christian community undergirded by a Trinitarian faith guided and upheld by the synergy of God's love, our witness to and relationship with Love Incarnate, and the Love's Power ever at work within, between, and among us.

What is our vision for ourselves?

Faithful church community known as Knox United

or

Body of Christ in this time and in this place?

Who knows what God is up to here and now in this postdoctrinal age?

Who knows where is the Holy Spirit calling the Church?

In the meantime, here, let us turn our attention to the texts themselves.

This week, in contrast to last we want to focus on some of the concrete example of the inherent challenges and struggles our faith ancestors, the Corinthians lived with in their efforts to attend to a Trinitarian understanding of God, Christ, and Holy Spirit at work in their midst.

In the first reading, 'Gifts of the Spirit', we hear Paul's reminder that despite the diversity of gifts given, there is but **one** Spirit; despite the variety of services offered, they are offered in the name of the **one** Lord, and despite the variety of activities emerging, they are activated by the **same** God.

Sounds like the Holy Trinity at work, yes?

More importantly than this, though, the apostle Paul also reminds his struggling community that the gifts of the Spirit are to be manifested, not in ways that exclude, but rather, in ways that invite and include the spiritual gifts of all for benefit the good of the whole body as opposed to some of its rivalling parts.

Second in our trilogy of readings this morning, we have the familiar passage about the 'Body of Christ' as a metaphor for the church in the world.

And once again, we hear Paul's call for an understanding of community with Christ as its center point inextricably woven together with God and the Holy Spirit.

In the glittering, cosmopolitan culture of Corinth, letting go of notions of privilege or hierarchy based on the experiences of the Holy that were not necessarily thought to have come from God were causing deep fissures in the community.

Last in our trilogy of readings this morning, we have Paul's instructions to the Corinthians entitled "The Gift of Love".

So often borrowed out of context for wedding ceremonies, the reading's original intent was to remind those early church followers that love in action is anything but romantic.

Using the word love, here, Paul reminds his beloved ones that they are each called to live out of the very same kind of self emptying courageous embodiment of Love as was exemplified in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ.

Not a shabby amount of thought for our consideration this Sunday morning as we gather for worship, nurture, fellowship, refreshment, and then an inter-faith learning experience with our guests representing Jewish Voices for Peace in the Holy Land after worship this morning!

With all of that in mind, then, let us come again to prayer: Holy, gracious, and amazing God, may the words on my lips and the thoughts and feelings we share as we continue to reflect together on your holy Word for us this day, may all of it be acceptable in your sight, amen.

Each Sunday we complete our readings from scripture with the words: Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the church and we respond: Thanks be to God.

From my perspective I wonder: *Just what is the Spirit saying to the church in these readings from Paul's letter to the Corinthians?*

I wonder: *Is the Holy Spirit telling us through scripture that being the body of Christ is as difficult for us in our day as it was for those first early Christians?*

I wonder: *Is the Holy Spirit reminding us here and now, that, in fact, our own context in the glittering, cosmopolitan culture Vancouver offers along with the many opportunities for 'spiritual' but not religious experiences, we are quite similar to the Corinthians?*

Speaking for my own participation in Christian community, I want to acknowledge this: It *is* tempting to think ourselves seekers of the 'spiritual' but not actually 'religious' or even 'Christian' for that matter.

It *is* very often difficult to relinquish my own needs, my own agendas, and my own well meaning and ever so tidy ideas and solutions that can easily impede rather than benefit the common good!

It *is* tempting to think the gifts we have received from God need not be refined nor purified through a personal relationship with Jesus, the Christ.

It *is* easy to get swept up in the false economy of valuing *some* spiritual gifts in our community as more notable, more praiseworthy, or even more 'needed than others', especially when they might actually overshadow the less obvious or apparent spiritual gifts being faithfully offered.

It *is* easy to forget that our spiritual gifts come to us from God our Creator.

It is easy to forget that our spiritual gifts take on their real meaning as result of our witness and experience of Christ, our Redeemer.

It *is* easy to forget that once equipped for service through the presence of the Holy Spirit, our spiritual gifts are to be used for the well being of the many rather than the few.

Very often that will call us into ever-widening circles of God's grace far beyond our own church doors.

Getting back to the focus of Paul's letter at hand however, I also want to talk a bit this morning about conflict in the context of Christian community.

Some of you here will recall having heard me say in the past that whenever two or more are gathered, there is usually trouble or dissatisfaction or disagreement.

Now trouble or dissatisfaction or disagreement in faithful community is not necessarily unhealthy in the grand scheme of things.

Trouble or dissatisfaction or disagreement does however need naming or acknowledgement, acceptance, and response.

And how might we engage in such response you might ask?

We have the blueprints right here in this morning's third excerpt from Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

Trouble, dissatisfaction, or disagreement requires the very courageous and self emptying love Jesus embodied by showing up where needed: by being present to one others' needs as they arise; by telling the truth in love; by letting go of outcomes; and by encouraging those who are able to heal themselves.

As Paul describes it, our work as faithful followers in the Way of Jesus is to be about the intentional bringing of our most loving selves to each situation, for, indeed, now we see in a mirror very dimly.

In a nutshell, its reasonable to assume that there is nothing clean, tidy, or neat about our lifelong formation as members in this or any particular community calling itself Christian.

But, then, many of us have come through worse, have we not?

In fact, failure is often the very best teacher for bringing us up close and personal with a steadfast and loving God, with Christ as our redeemer, and with the Holy Spirit as our constant advocate and friend.

Listening for what the Spirit is saying to the church is most certainly not limited to Scripture.

Here, at Knox having come through a time of significant change and transition, we find ourselves often in conversation about where it is the Spirit is calling us.

This happens in ones and twos, in small groups, and in some of our new governance teams emerging out of the period of interim ministry.

This last year, we here at Knox, have formed two new teams that have called us out of our habitual patterns into some significant new directions.

In particular, this morning, we remember that some of the initiatives our Exploring Faith and Stewardship and Social Justice teams, being deliberately attentive to the winds of the Spirit, has called us into all sorts of new and unexpected relationships with neighbours near and far.

Last fall, the two teams undertook the shared work of hosting two speakers from the Fossil Free Faith Bureau.

From there, we continued this work in partnership with six other neighbouring churches on the Westside hosting the Syria 101 event.

Following on from there was our own smaller pot luck gathering emphasizing building relationships with those who are walking the talk of faith as it relates to environmental degradation.

This morning, for the fourth time in the last year, we have an opportunity to be educated, engaged, and empowered through conversation and learning with a particular group of folks representative of Jewish Voices for Peace in the Holy Land.

With all of that in mind, who knows where the Holy Spirit will lead us next?

With heartfelt thanksgiving for the winds of the Holy Spirit calling us in new directions with partners in the wider community, we give thanks for the opportunity to participate in ever wider circles of grace concern, and compassion for indeed, "Christ has no body now but ours".

Amen.