

2nd Sunday after the Epiphany
St. Augustine's, Freeland
I Corinthians 12.1-11
January 20 2013

Blessed be the Name of God

Last Tuesday night I had a bad night's sleep. I might call it, "Sleepless Near Seattle." At the same time, I awakened with what I take to be a good idea. We'll see.

In a semi-conscious state, anticipating sleep, I got entangled with a number of things that needed my attention, though not necessarily in the middle of Tuesday night. I was supposed to write something for Albert Rose for the Light. I puzzled over that. I have been asked to consult with a parish in Seattle about the re-design of their chapel, and I puzzled over that. I will be teaching a course at Seattle University School of Theology and Ministry this spring, and the booklist is due next Wednesday, and I was puzzling over that. I had email correspondence from friends in Canada and in Ecuador that needed attention. That crossed my mind.

Further, I had just barely begun a sermon. I had the intention of exploring the gospel reading from John this morning, about the wedding in Cana and a prodigious amount of wine. The little that I had written began by wishing that John had had a good editor. I caught myself describing the reading in very technical biblical terms. I called it "a mess." But, really, I had made no progress on the sermon, so I puzzled over that as well.

Happily, after what seemed like a great long time, I fell asleep. Ironically, however, I fell into a sort of dream like I've had before, one where I can't get loose or find my way home or locate Amy or something like that. In this instance, I was working in someone's yard Wednesday morning, doing heaven knows what, when I looked at the clock and saw that it was twenty past ten. I was supposed to have coffee with Jim Langler that morning at ten! I ran home and set about trying to find my iPhone. Instead of my phone, I found every other comparable sized item in our house—a deck of cards, for example—but not my phone. I searched and searched to no avail. In desperation, unable to find my phone, I despaired of the task and woke up.

Right then, clear as day, at 3 o'clock in the morning, I knew about my sermon. I had to preach on I Corinthians! That's how I account for what I'm about to say. [As to coffee with Jim, I made that on time!]

"Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed." So begins Paul's consideration of the

interconnectedness of the faithful, an interconnectedness that, in the next section of his letter, he likens to the human body. Paul's readers, the Christians at Corinth, were a fractious bunch, undisciplined and in need, from Paul's point of view, in need of clarity on the nature of the Christian life. His agenda is clear as he reiterates his point in various ways. "...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." Variety, as Paul makes so clear, need not be fractious. In fact, as his body metaphor makes clear in the next passage, this variety is entirely necessary to the health and function of the body, and so also for any healthy community of Christian people.

The Christians in Corinth needed Paul's insights to get themselves straightened out, to get them settled into the pattern of Christian life, to convey to them a cooperative and sympathetic spirit.. They needed him to create or restore a spirit and a way of living that was absent, replaced by competition and seeming disregard.

You'll recall that this letter, Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, contains that marvelous chapter, Chapter 13, that speaks so knowingly and compellingly about love. "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." He concludes, "And now faith, hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is love." This is what Paul knew the folks in Corinth needed to hear, and to hear it directly from him.

Last Sunday, Mary Green and I did the Forum between services. We brought into the Forum bits of a conversation that occurred in the Clergy Team meeting the previous Wednesday. I was persuaded that the parish was at a good place to consider a new mission statement and to refresh our core values. I felt the time was right. In what I offered at the Forum, I hoped that other parishioners would confirm what I thought.

Mary took us through an exercise designed to help us think about what we need to think about when we make important decisions, thinking here again that our mission statement and core values invited thoughtful and well reasoned review and eventual decision. People were quite engaged! Mary and I both thought the Forum time last week was usefully spent.

Reflecting on the experience of that Forum and mindful of Paul's rightful concerns with the good people of Corinth, I began to wonder what he would have to say to us, the good people of St. Augustine's in the Woods, at our particular place in time and space. What would he say?

He would doubtless greet us in the Holy Name of Jesus, calling us "saints," as he did the people he wrote to in Rome. "Greetings to the saints in Freeland," or something like that. He would speak warmly to Nigel, commending him for his care and service over many years, and he would greet Susan Sandri, our Senior Warden, commending her and her

vestry stalwarts for their willingness to lead, and their many graces. He would admit to his grief at the news of the death of Bill Burnett, and he would eulogize his founding ministry here and rejoice in his legacy.

Instead of having to discipline us as he did the Corinthians, I suspect Paul would write a letter of encouragement and high regard. He would know of our historic involvement in social services in this part of the world. He would know of our continued participation in works of service and our attention to a variety of needs and good purposes. He would applaud for our support of the various ministries of this parish and he would surely praise the faithful worship offered here and vigorous musical energy that David Locke sets loose.

While he would rejoice at the devotion and energy of our young people, he would observe that we are a mature lot and wonder perhaps how that demographic fact might be mitigated. He would also observe that whatever diversity there may be amongst us, our collective racial stock generates fairly pale coloring. He would commend us for our hospitality and the welcome we extend to each and all, and he would envy how well we eat!

Paul, the Apostle, would know a good deal about us and value us rightly as instruments of faithful action and right intentions, possessed of a cheerful and refreshing heart. He would speak to us about the future that calls us and urge us to be thoughtful and diligent in pursuit of that future, using whatever gifts God has given us to discern the contours and textures that await. He would also rightly caution us against self-satisfaction or boasting in ourselves.

Assuming that Paul would have studied on our parish calendar, there are two dimensions of our life here that would draw him into new territory. In Galatians 3.28, Paul wrote, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Paul believed that and taught that to all of us. Without regard to social station, he saw us all as members of the household of Christ, all the while tolerating the political fact of slavery. So, were Paul here tomorrow, he would encounter a large gathering of "saints" for whom the historical fact of slavery is intolerable, and the current expression of "Jim Crow" is equally so. Paul would be asked by the faithfulness of this parish to extend himself beyond his social complacency, and that would be very good. Add to that the fact that tomorrow will also be the Second Inaugural for a son of the African Diaspora, and the whole thing goes over the top!

Further, were Paul here to share our morning, he would know that after the 10:30 a.m. service, we will have a reception to honor two newly married couples, members of the parish, part of this household of "saints." Struggle as he did with marriage, he was nonetheless certain, as he says earlier in I Corinthians, "...it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion." [7.9b] In older renditions, it read, "...it is better to

marry than to burn.” Happily, for many married couples, it is possible to be married and still be “afame with passion.”

What would awaken Paul today is that the couples in question are same sex couples, Diane and Grethe, and Terry and Harry, duly married since December 9 2012. Our intent this morning is to stand with them, to support them and to give thanks for their promise-making. In the same way that Paul would have to have put away his tolerance of slavery so as to stand with us as the inheritors of the teachings of Martin Luther King, Jr., so also Paul would be invited to join the circle of those for whom marriage equality has become an article of faith. Likely, Paul would recognize the rightness of this celebration. He would also recognize that his teachings of long ago as regards human sexuality should be left in the footlocker of their historical context. Leave them there. No need to trot them out now.

Hearing from Paul would do us good, that’s for sure. Having Paul pay attention to us would likely do him good as well. In both exchanges, the faith of the Church would be made stronger, and what we have to offer to the world, even our small part of the world, what we have to offer will be all the more expressive of the larger purposes of God--drawing people together, expressing generosity and respect, serving in whatever ways arise, speaking a word of kindness, standing with those who do justice--the larger purposes of God. Paul would encourage us in all this, and we would be made strong by his cheering us on. Heaven knows, we do have things to do!

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