

The 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany, January 27, 2019. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA. Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

Luke's gospel is so familiar! Too familiar! It's easy to miss what's happening because we don't know the culture. After reading scripture, Jesus "sat down," and the eyes of all were on him. Why? Because he was the preacher! You sat to preach. And then the words about him fulfilling the scriptures! In other words, this was, according to Jesus, his platform, his manifesto. This is what it would mean to follow him.

In a sense, the passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthian community is doing something similar – laying out a vision and inviting people into it. At this moment in the history of this congregation, this passage from this letter is the most important biblical reading you will hear.

And actually – I believe – it's the most important Pauline passage for *any* Christian community, because it's central to how Paul understood a Christian community should be structured. The Corinthian community was a microcosm of broader Roman culture – what happened in Corinth reflected the sorts of issues that were likely to occur in every place where Paul sought to bring the message of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

The congregations Paul founded were always in Roman administrative centers: Philippi, Thessaloniki, Corinth – areas called "dioceses" – which is where we get that name from – the Roman Empire.

When a new community of any sort formed in the culture of the 1st Century, it should come as no surprise to you that they tended to structure themselves in the same way that the Empire was structured: hierarchical, patriarchal – you get the picture.

That's the basis of the problems in Corinth. It's obvious from what Paul says in this letter that The Corinthian community was experiencing sharp divisions over its own social structure, which were expressed even in its own understanding of faith. The problem was that what Paul proclaimed was counter to the way the Empire, and Roman society, looked.

In this letter, as in the one to the Galatians that he wrote around the same time, one principle dominated everything that Paul said: the new community of Christ exhibits, or should exhibit, a unity birthed by radical equality. "No longer slave or free, no longer Jew or Greek, no longer male and female," because "[we] are all one in Christ Jesus" [crucified and risen]. (Gal 3: 28) because "we have all been baptized into [Christ's] body" (1 Cor. 12:13)

The gateway into this new community is baptism. In baptism, Paul says, we have died with Christ, AND been raised with and united with Christ. Quite literally, we agree to set aside our old lives in the context of the cross and embrace the new creation – through the ultimate surrender of everything – death – we enter into new life – the resurrection life. In baptism we're not putting on some mask, *we now share Christ's sonship*. This is not – cannot be – about making minor modifications to our lives, nor is it a casual or a part-time commitment; this is about everything.

Nor is this vision something that's relevant only inside the religious community; " this is about *ALL* social relationships. To put it another way, this is a vision of community as the body of Christ where all have equal status, even if their functions are different. It's as much a political statement as it is a religious one – it's upending the status quo where men had (have) power over women, where the wealthy had (have) power over slaves, where one religion saw (sees) itself as superior to all others.

Here's one takeaway that's as relevant today as it was in the 1st Century: Paul's vision of a community united through its radical diversity, required (and still requires) OF MEN a much more radical break from their (our) former social and religious self-understanding; and it required (and still requires) much more of the wealthy than the poor, much more of the dominant culture than those in the minority. In the body of Christ, Paul says, we are to do away with all privileges of religion, class, and cast, and it not simply allows but *requires* of all who are not male, not wealthy, not in control that they intentionally and actively exercise leadership functions within the missionary movement that is the Church of God..

Pretty quickly in the Early Church, Paul's vision got subverted. Religious functionaries appeared, with titles designating their function *and* ascribing them a higher status: *episcopos, presbyteros, diaconos* – bishop, priest, deacon. Despite what Paul proposed, the understanding of their function *and* their status was tied to the culture in which they lived. And so it's been. When, in the middle ages, those in power were princes, then the leaders in the church were called princes of the church; when, later, when aristocracy was valued and respected, the leaders in the church were viewed as aristocrats. And when – in, say, the last century – professionals were respected and valued, religious leaders were viewed as professionals.

Now, what does that mean when a Christian community – say ours (but this applies to pretty much every Church) has religious functionaries who are given a different status by way of religious rite? People like me.

At the least it means that we need to ask, of the vision Paul lays out, if it was simply impossible to implement because it was too radical, or was it his vision was hijacked by the powerful? Or maybe was it that human nature is incapable of maintaining a community of radical diversity where roles and functions are different but equally valued, where status is absent?

For the Church of today I see these sorts of questions: is there some middle ground where Paul's vision of a community united in its radical diversity can in some way be implemented, while also honoring the structures and roles we have developed in the succeeding 2,000 years? If you now understand yourselves as a community gathered around a minister, can you also be a ministering community?

For you, here – and for the rest of the Church – this is not an academic question. In the diocese of Maine, for example, with 54 parishes and another 18 summer chapels, most of the clergy are part-time. Does that idea disturb you? Here's the thing: that's the future for the whole Church – not just the Episcopal Church, not just in Maine; they're ahead of the curve. When the tsunami comes, they're gonna survive it. Would you like to survive it?

Its always better to ask the difficult questions when the wolves are not at the door; when the tsunami's crest isn't on the horizon. I encourage you to ask these questions, do this work, now, and in the near future. Be prepared for what will inevitably come; make contingency plans; establish a vision and goals; learn to love one another (even if sometimes you can't like each other!). Get ahead of the curve.

One last thing – ever wonder what the “greater gifts” are that Paul exhorts us to “strive for?” This letter is in three parts: part one is about faith; part two is about love; part three is about hope. Ever heard those three together before? You'll hear it next week: “faith, hope, love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is.....love”!

However a community is structured, love is to be the defining characteristic. Do that, and you can't go far wrong!