

Divine Variety

The Morning Message for Annual Meeting Sunday
United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Sunday, January 26, 2020

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; 27-31

This morning's text is from a letter, or an epistle as the scholars call it, written by Paul to the ancient church in Rome. Paul did a lot of letter writing to churches, usually churches he personally founded. He did this because he couldn't be everywhere at once for sure. He also did this because he had a grand vision for how the church universal should function as it waited for the return of Christ. This ancient church universal was made up of small clusters of Jesus' followers in and around the Mediterranean and what we now call the Holy Land. These first followers of Jesus believed first and foremost that Jesus was coming back soon, in their lifetimes, to usher in the end times.

As the years passed and that didn't happen, Paul and other leaders of that first group of Christians, Peter among them, realized they needed to do some work to help the ancient churches do more than just wait around for Jesus to return. Those ancient churches were fighting and squabbling about everything from what to have at church suppers (yes, they had them frequently in those early churches) to how to hold Communion and even to recognize charlatans trying to take over the churches. They argued over who could belong to their churches, who could hold leadership positions in their churches, who would make decisions

about what the church and her people could and could not do in the wider world. Sound familiar?? When you really read these ancient texts in the Epistles, and you understand what you're reading, the years fade away and you can see quite clearly that the church has been working to figure out what it means to be church together since its earliest days. This was a major part of Paul's work as an apostle. It, along with some sweeping theological summaries of Jesus and what he was trying to do, contributed to Paul's status within the early church and the church today. Interesting to realize is that we have Paul's letters in response to those churches, but we do not have the original letters written to him to ask for his help. So, we are left to surmise what the issue was that Paul was attempting to address in his surviving letters.

Such is the case with this letter Paul wrote to the ancient church in Corinth. There was a major disagreement in this church at this time, all centering around a group of folks trying to take over the church on the grounds that they were obviously chosen by God for leadership because they claimed the gift of glossolalia or speaking in tongues. Claiming this was the language of heaven which, conveniently, only this particular group could speak and understand, they were attempting to impose their vision for how the church should be the church on everyone else. Paul was contacted and our text this morning is part of his response.

Understanding this context for this text is important as we approach it this morning. For one thing, we can immediately see that the church has always struggled with simple questions like how to organize themselves to do the work of the church, to carry out the *Missio Dei*, the work of God entrusted to the church by Jesus himself. For another, we can also see that there have always been people who want to usurp the church for their own reasons which often have everything to do with their own egos and very little if anything to do with the work of God. In the text we read this morning, we find Paul's understanding of how the church is to be the church when it is comprised of so many different people with different ideas about how to work together, what it means to work together. Paul doesn't begin with a description of what he believes is the right way to be church. Instead he begins with a description of the people in the church and the gifts each and every person brings to the church and to God. In other words, Paul like Jesus begins with the people of God as the people of God. He doesn't begin with worrying about money. He doesn't begin with organizational structure. He begins with people and the divine variety they always bring to the work of God.

“Now 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.” That's it. This sums up the entirety of Paul's

recommendation on how the church is to figure out what it needs to do to be the church and do the work of God in the midst of a larger community of people outside the church. We are to work together to discern each other's gifts for the work of God and then we are to encourage each other in using those gifts, which come from God in the first place, to be the church together in whatever our local reality may be. That's all there is to it. Of course, like all great ideas being able to understand it is one thing. Being able to put it into practice is entirely another matter. And yet, this putting it into practice is exactly what God is asking us, needing us to do as our church, here and now. Guess what? You already know how...

Let me use yesterday as an example. Yesterday was, to all outward appearances, just another Saturday in January – cold, gray and threatening rain. Except it wasn't just another Saturday here. It was the church being the church from sun-up to sun-down, and beyond. Let me explain. A group of ladies gathered here early, early yesterday morning to bake some scones for the Valentine Tea but before they even arrived, a recipe had been found and researched, ingredients shopped for and donated, kitchen supplies here reviewed to determine how much additional stuff in the way of baking sheets, mixing bowls, etc. was needed. 8 am came and the group of a dozen or so gathered and began to bake. And, boy did they bake. They needed 300 scones but they

ended up with 478. You heard me right. 478 in four varieties. When I arrived a little after 11am, they were waiting for the last batch to come out of the oven. The kitchen was cleaned. The scones already finished were packaged and neatly stacked in the freezer. 478 scones and it wasn't even noon.

The church smelled incredible after all that baking as you can imagine. And, let me tell you, that subtle smell of freshly baked scones – all 478 of them – was exactly what the grieving family and friends of Erwin Dessaulles needed to smell when they began arriving for Erwin's memorial service a little before noon. It was beyond comforting to walk into this sacred place, God's house, and have it smell like home. But, so much more than this had been underway to prepare for this memorial service than just this. When I arrived, I was greeted by Lynn and Carolyn trying to figure out the best placement for all the flowers. The heat was already turned up in the sanctuary. The orders of worship were already printed and waiting. The guest book was out. The prayer cards were out. The hall was set-up for the reception following the service. The ladies did this in the midst of baking 478 scones.

Soon the caterer arrived and all the food for the reception was placed on the buffet tables. The coffee and punch table was set up and ready to go. The display of photos done by the family was out, flanked by the two vases with this morning's flowers since there were so many other flower arrangements for the

service. Soon the musicians arrived. First my friend and colleague Bob Nolan (he's played for us here before) who was the organist and then the soloist who was a friend of the family. They got acquainted and planned their parts in the service together. It wasn't long before the rest of the family began arriving and then the guests for the service started coming. And they came and came and came, filling the entire church. A wonderful tribute to Erwin and a great, great comfort to the family. The service unfolded as planned. The reception unfolded as planned, with a few of our folks here to assist and then clean up. Lynn was here all day – from before dawn until she finally left with me after 4pm. Ed was here before the service to lend a hand wherever and ended up doing everything from ushering to moving flowers to gathering up extra bulletins to give to the family after the service.

Dear friends, I'm here to tell you yesterday was a good church day. In fact, yesterday was about the best church day any church could hope for. We were the church in this community yesterday. From the earliest moments of the baking crew to when the last of us walked out of the building to go home, we were the church as the church is supposed to be. The people who were able to be here to do the work of the day yesterday were here. The people who couldn't be here will be here on another day to do the work that needs to be done on that day. Dear friends, this is exactly what Paul means by his description of the working church

as people willing to use their gifts in the moment for whatever God needs to have happen in the church. He understood two millennia ago that no one can be church alone. It always takes a group of people giving of themselves, of their gifts and talents and energies, to be the church in the community.

The question then becomes, does it matter that the church be the church in these days of strife and division within our country and the world? And what about all those different understandings of what it means to be church? Why are some churches so conservative and others, like ours, so progressive? Guess what. Not our problem. All God is asking of us is to be *this* church, our church, in *this* moment in *this* place. And that, dear friends, is more than enough. I know it is more than enough. How do I know that? Because of what I saw and heard from the people who were here yesterday for that memorial service. Well over 100 people were here, most of them not members of our church. And more of them than I can count came up to tell me what a wonderful church this is, what a wonderful feeling they had in this church, how inspiring our service for Erwin was, how amazing it was that we could host such a lovely reception. Dear friends, this church was the church to so many people yesterday and in doing so it accomplished exactly what God asks of any church every day. What is that? Simple. We touched hearts and, even if for just a moment, we transformed lives as we shared our faith in Jesus in

word and deed in ways that so many had never experienced before. *That* is our reason for being here. That is our reason for being the church and we could only pull it off because we know and understand and celebrate the divine variety of many gifts within our church to do what needs to be done in the moment.

I wanted us to think about all this today because today is Annual Meeting Sunday, that Sunday when our congregationalism is showing for all the world to see. At the Annual Meeting you will read reports on the work of the boards and committees for 2019. You will see the financial summaries from last year and the proposed budget for the year ahead. You will see the needs of the People Plan for 2020 and I hope you will prayerfully volunteer in some capacity if you have not done so already. And in the midst of all this celebration of how this church is church, I hope you will give thanks to God for the amazing gift this church is to everyone who walks through our doors, on Sunday mornings, for one of our events, to a memorial service, to one of the 12 step groups that meet here. We ARE the church here in this place and we need YOU, each and every one of you, to continue to be. Paul says it all, “strive for the greater gifts ... and I will show you a still more excellent way.” Let it be so. Amen.