

Inclusivity

A sermon preached in Glebe Road United Church

Third Sunday after Epiphany

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1 Corinthians 12: 12-31

A couple of weeks ago we had a congregational meeting to talk about our “Mission Statement” and our “Vision” for ourselves as a faith community. And one of things that we like best about ourselves and our community is that we are “inclusive”; that is, we welcome anyone who wants to come into our community. We recognize at the outset that we are different from one another. We have different beliefs, we have different faith backgrounds, we have different outlooks on life. And course, we come from different age groups, different values, and many other differences as well. Nevertheless, we want our community to include everyone who wants to be part of us. We hope that different people will bring different gifts to enrich our community.

Last week I preached on Paul’s ideas about different spiritual gifts; each of us has a gift to bring to the church, to this community of faith. So inclusivity seems like a good policy for every church, but if new people are going to welcome in our midst then the church needs to be tolerant of everyone. This week I continue on with the rest of chapter 12 in the first letter to the church in Corinth. Listen now to Paul’s famous thoughts on the Body of Christ:

1 Cor. 12: 12-31

Paul is calling on the church of his day to respect the differences between the people in the church. Some new Christians were Jews and some were Gentiles. Some Jews thought that all the Gentiles should become Jews before they could become Christians. Paul disagreed, and in this passage he defended his point of view: v 15-20

Paul’s image of the church as the Body of Christ is one of the most famous of all his teachings, and this is the one Sunday in the three-year cycle of the common Lectionary that churches all over the world are able to focus on it. This is also the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, when these same churches across the world think about the goal of all Christians to become more tolerant of the different denominations with the final goal of a single denomination where everyone will be welcome, where everyone will feel at home. As I was preparing this sermon I thought of fellow preachers across the world struggling with this same text. According to Paul, there is nothing fundamental that divides us; we are all baptised into one Body: Jews and Greeks, slave and free, and we are all made to drink of one Spirit. Those particular divisions don’t mean very much in our day; any Jews that have survived Christian inspired holocausts and systematic discrimination over the centuries aren’t beating down our doors to become one of us, and we can hardly blame them. Several years ago a confirmation from a United Church not far from here visited Holy Blossom Synagogue on Bathurst Street when Gunther Plaut was the Rabbi there. In the meeting with Rabbi Plaut afterwards one of the more precocious teenagers challenged the Rabbi by asking him, “Why don’t the Jews try to convert the Christians?” Rabbi Plaut smiled and said, “We would be happy if they would just be Christian.” In our day, the divisions in Christianity are not between the Jews and the Gentiles. If Paul were living now he might have written something like “we are all baptised into one body: first world and third world Christians; all baptised into one Body: men and women; all baptised into one Body: religious right and social gospel folk; all baptised into one body: straight and gay. And when we look at it that way, with

the modern adjectives that so easily divide us, it's hard to see much unity, hard to see much tolerance or inclusivity, hard for us to imagine the church universal as one single body. For a start, we often disagree with one another over the simple basics of our faith. These disagreements often lead to estrangements, division. And this has been the case ever since Paul first wrote these words comparing the church with a single Body.

While the value of inclusivity has a long and honourable history in the church going all the way back to Paul and its beginnings, we must confess that the church doesn't often live up to its beliefs in this area. We put signs outside our churches saying that "all are welcome", but what we really mean is that everyone is welcome who thinks like we do; everyone is welcome if you do things here the way that we do, the ways that we are comfortable with. Now I know that this sort of thing doesn't happen here (!) but we always need to be watchful, because this sort of thing happens in every other church except ours. And in our efforts to be inclusive we might just welcome someone into our midst who wanted us to be exclusive, and then what would we do? Something to think about perhaps...

If inclusivity means anything surely it must mean that we can overcome our differences and make room for everyone. However, we are going to do that we will have to find something to believe in that will pull us together. For Paul the great unifying force for Christians has always been Christ crucified and risen. Unfortunately, the history of the church make it very clear that things haven't worked out that way. If the history of the Christian church teaches us anything it teaches us that while we value inclusivity we have turned out to be fragmented and divided by our differences. "Christ crucified and risen" has been too abstract a concept to work very well. We need a more concrete focus for what we believe. For Protestant Christians that something has always been scripture. Luther's great claim that "Sola Scriptura" or scripture only was the rallying cry for the Protestant Reformation. Even that though doesn't seemed to have worked very well since scripture could be interpreted in so many ways. Even in Luther's day there were wars over the interpretation of scripture. The Body of Christ was fragmented again and again.

So if we here at Glebe really want to be inclusive we have a lot of history to overcome. As soon as we begin to define who we are, that definition builds a fence around us that is going to exclude someone. Perhaps a measure of exclusivity is the price we pay for knowing who we are. Perhaps this is the price of having an identity, having a belief system. Perhaps inclusivity is like the horizon, an impossible goal, one can continually recedes as we move towards it. Still, that doesn't automatically mean that we shouldn't strive in that that direction, only that we shouldn't be too surprised if we end up contradicting ourselves somewhere down the road. Paul certainly did. Paul actually had some very rigid ideas about what constituted a valid Christian faith and there were lots of heretics around as far as Paul was concerned. His claim that "all are one in Christ Jesus" was an ideal, not a practical objective that anyone should actually try to achieve.

Perhaps we can learn something from the experience of the church as we seek to outline our mission and vision for the future. Perhaps inclusivity by itself is not enough to guide our thoughts and actions. Perhaps in addition to including our neighbour in our group we have to love that neighbour as well. That's harder to do, especially if our neighbour is different from us, but maybe that should be our goal. Another thought: Perhaps straightforward and unexamined inclusivity is too simple a concept on which we can build a resilient and healthy Body of Christ here. Paul talks about the Body having hands and feet, eyes and ears, and the need for different parts of the body to respect one another. But if I might continue the analogy for a minute should the Body of Christ have an immune system. Is there something infection or even cancer out there threatening the Body of Christ. Should our inclusivity have limits? I don't know the answer to that but perhaps this is something to think about.

In this week of prayer for Christian Unity we are sensitive to all the hurt and waste that has come from the divisions in the Christian family, and we need to be open to dialogue and common efforts with our neighbours in faith as well as our much more numerous neighbours of no faith. We need to define our purpose so that our reasons for existence extend well beyond mere survival and benefit the world outside our doors. We need to reach out to our neighbours whether or not they want to join us, and whether or not they support us and whether or not they agree with us. And if we can do that then a nuanced and effective inclusivity will surely follow as those who respect what are doing seek to become part of us. And we Christians will be known for our love.

Thanks be to God..

Amen