

A Sense of Humor; a Sense of Seriousness; an Experience of God's Love Influencing Community

1st Corinthians 12:1,4-7,12-31

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The Apostle Paul was no Conan O'Brien, Jay Leno, or David Letterman. He was not Chris Rock, Jon Stewart, or Stephen Colbert. Neither was he Rush Limbaugh, Chris Mathews, or Keith Olbermann. He was not Molly Ivins, Ann Coulter, or Maureen Dowd. Nor was he Andy Rooney, Art Buchwald, or Garrison Keillor. You may have your own favorite television, print media, or stage / stand-up comic personality, or your own favorite political or social satirist.

The Apostle Paul was a theologian and professional Bible student. He was an advocate of being a follower and disciple of Jesus Christ. He was a starter of churches in the most difficult of cultural situations; and he was a "doctor" of churches who struggled to exhibit and practice healthy faith-community habits and relationships. Among Paul's personal gifts, however, lurking almost stealthily beneath the surface, was a considerable talent for satire, for critical wit, for barbed humor, and for take-a-step-back / tongue-in-cheek common sense. His was a honed talent encouraging persons and faith communities to recognize (1) sacredness, (2) blessings, and (3) suffering-but-victorious grace in life to which they otherwise seemed blind: "Hello!!!" he sometimes seems to be calling, "How obvious can this be? To what pains does God have to go for you to recognize this?"

The verses we've read this morning may be the longest passage among his surviving writings in which Paul develops an extended metaphor for the purpose of making clear what, he thinks, should be more obvious than it apparently is.

Corinth was a very cosmopolitan Greek community. The church established and developing there was a community of persons from diverse backgrounds who held varied perspectives and opinions, and who were able to justify with argument the perspective and opinion of which they were convinced.

Diversity is a wonderful gift and quality among communities. And, really, a community cannot have too much diversity as a sacred gift from God, but it is certainly possible, and may be all too common, not to manage very well the gifts with which God has blessed you, and the Corinthians were great at that.

Diversity of perspectives and opinions is challenging, because we tend not easily to share decision-making and authority. At least two characteristics stand between a community and health in the relationships of that community.

One is disrespect and resentment. Division of labor is "one thing" – persons having different and varied responsibilities. Division of labor is important. In a commercial, an industrial, an educational, a governmental, a medical, or a faith community, persons have varied talent and varied responsibilities. Innumerable tasks need to be accomplished. Division of labor is essential. Disrespect and resentment are something else.

What if the brain resents the colon, saying, "I develop important thoughts and regulate essential vital functions such as breathing, sleeping, waking, swallowing, seeing,

hearing, but you are full of unclean and smelly waste”? What if the brain says to the colon, “I wish the body did not have a colon; and, if the body has to have a colon, perhaps I can pretend you don’t exist, or, if necessary, I can simply send impersonal communications and commands to you.”

What then, if the colon correctly says back to the brain, “Oh great and mighty Brain, pardon me for fouling up your sense of importance, sophistication, and image. I’ll just cease functioning for awhile, a few days, or a week, so you can feel what it’s like if I actually don’t exist for you.”

How can any “body” be healthy if two or more major systems resent each other? How long can any community be healthy if two or more individuals or groups-of - individuals resent each other?

Resentment creates the wish that the other did not exist or that the other did not require public and relational acknowledgement.

A second characteristic standing between a community and health in the relationships of that community is “control.” Within the body, it’s not so much covetousness, saying, “I wish I could be that other organ.” The colon does not necessarily want “to be the brain.” The brain obviously does not want to be the colon.

The communications’ systems specialist does not necessarily want to be the human resources’ specialist. But what if the communications’ systems specialist wants to tell the human resources’ specialist how to do and be in his or her own responsibilities. “If I must acknowledge you, let me also tell you how to do what you’re doing, so I will be satisfied.”

Resentment between organs and systems within a physical body would be unhealthy. Additionally, if one organ or system attempted to exercise “control for the sake of control” within a physical body, it would be equally unhealthy. Individuals and groups are no different. Paul’s argument is absolutely on target. Resentment and control lead to either a festering of negative feelings or an escalation of negative feelings. The result: dysfunction or diminishment. Either the group works with unnecessary stress or the group works with lessened capacity because someone quits. “Oh, good riddance,” controlling persons may say, whether a controlling person is the one who quit or who contributed to another person quitting.

Paul believes a diverse set of gifts and contributions are necessary for health as the Body of Christ in the world. He writes with a sense of humor. He exhibits a sense of seriousness. He is convinced that the experience of God’s love influencing the community – the Body – of God’s people in the world makes all the difference in the world. That’s why he transitions from this discussion of respect and harmony within a physical body, saying, “Let me show you a still more excellent way.”

That would be the way of God’s love, known and experienced and “at work” among us in Jesus Christ: His teachings, his ministry, his respect, his forgiveness, his healing, his death, and resurrection-beyond-death. “O members of the body / of the human and faith communities, let us experience personally and exhibit in relation to all others, that ‘more excellent way.’”

– All honor and praise be to God.