

Third Sunday After Epiphany (C/RCL)
1 Corinthians 1.10-18
January 27, 2008
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

This weekend of our annual congregational meeting is a beautiful, perfect time to hear what St. Paul had to say about living in unity. He wrote it almost two thousand years ago, to the people of Corinth in what is now the country of Greece. They lived far away from us, in time **and** space, but human dynamics don't change much no matter **when** or **where** we live.

It's tough for a pastor (like Paul) to hear that a parish he worked hard to build up is breaking apart like a ship in stormy seas after he leaves. Paul felt like the spiritual father of the church in Corinth, and like a parent who hears things he doesn't like about the behavior of the children he loves, he writes them to ask,

“What's going on over there? Don't make me come down and see!”

The city of Corinth was known throughout the Roman empire for activities that would make even sailors blush. Looking at its surroundings alone, then, it wasn't a surprise that the church there was a **mess**. People seemed to be divided over everything. Some practiced or justified sexual goings-on that Paul said even pagans rejected. Others were on the opposite end of the spectrum, believing that even the relationship of a husband and wife in marriage was sinful. Members of the congregation fought each other over property, not just over morality. Paul was scandalized that they took their complaints to the **civil** courts to settle them, one Christian pitted against another before a “pagan” judge. Eucharist for them was set within a love feast (basically a church pot-luck), which would have been fine except folks were like locusts, devouring everything in sight, and leaving nothing for those at the end of the line. They had big theological differences, like whether the Father **really** raised Jesus from the dead, and smaller ones, like whether women should keep their heads covered in church. When Paul wrote,

“...it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters,” (1 Cor. 1.11)

that was **quite** an understatement ☺.

Our Holy Trinity family is a **real**, not a “virtual” community, made up of flesh-and-blood, fallible people, so there are differences among us, too. We know each other well enough that we’re aware of each other’s vices and not just each other’s virtues. We could as easily come up with a list of faults as a list of the fetching qualities of our neighbors in the pew (or in the pulpit!). Thankfully, I don’t hear any claims to perfection around here, because **none** of us qualifies, despite Jesus’ command in St. Matthew’s Gospel that we be “perfect, as [our] heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5.48).

Sparks fly around here every once in a while. We are blessed with a large, diverse community, made up of people with sometimes (ok, **often** ☺) opposing opinions about what songs we should sing, how we should conduct the stewardship drive, **how much** money we should send beyond our walls and **to whom** we should send it, what our young people should wear when they are confirmed, what time services should be, and what stance people of faith should take on social/political issues like the death penalty, the war, the environment, government subsidies to the poor, same-sex marriage and “you name it.”

Diversity of opinion signals **strength** rather than **weakness** in our congregation. It shows that we draw from a wide segment of society, that our membership spans the spectrum of age, profession, religious roots, social background, political preference. There is no expectation in this community that everyone agrees on everything. The expectation is only that when we **do** disagree, we remain respectful of each other, willing to listen to what God has to say in the Word, and open to the possibility that the Holy Spirit may push, pull or cajole us to think and act in new ways.

Here’s the heart of it:

God wants **unity, not uniformity** among us.

Here's the source of our unity: the belief that in Baptism we are joined to Jesus' saving death and resurrection, made members of the Body of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit to be inheritors of eternal life, co-workers in the Kingdom of God, entrusted with the mission of sharing God's creative and redeeming Word with all the world.

The **real**, shorthand agenda for this year's annual meeting, and for our lives, is asking God this:

“What are You doing in this world, and how can we be a part of it?”

Let us continue to be strong in our diversity, respectful of our differences, and infused with the Holy Spirit of unity, for the sake of mission.

The question before us as we elect various congregational leaders and as we vote on the proposed budget, is not, “What is **my** preference?” but “What is **God's** preference?”. The budget isn't just about numbers; more than ever, it's about how money will fuel ministry in this year of our Lord 2008. Our Congregational Council is boldly commending to you a budget which includes a full-time Director of Youth & Family Ministry to help us reach out in faithful and fresh ways to the 200-plus children and youth in our care, and to their families, their most important mentors in faith. Our projected income would allow us to add that full-time youth and family ministry position by bringing a **half-time** rather than **full-time** assistant pastor on board. If you are a confirmed, voting member of this faith family, please join us for this important meeting. Your prayerfully considered input about what God's preference is for us, is both valued and invited. If you are an interested visitor, or a regular part of this worshipping community by not an official member, you are also welcomed to join us as an observer. I believe you'll be edified by how the Spirit enables us to be one in Christ in the midst of our God-given diversity.

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

