
Body of Christ
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
January 23, 2022
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a and Luke 4:14-21

St. Paul shares a very interesting image with us. He shares the idea that the church is the body of Christ.

[image: potato heads]

And that as a body, it has many parts that are all important and necessary to function properly. We have all heard that message of diversity and unity so many times, I wonder how we even understand it. And I wonder what St. Paul would think if we went back in time, got him and brought him to Brantford today.

[image: early church]

But before we go get St. Paul, let's start by putting our own minds back 2000 years. And I invite us to imagine the early church. In some respects, I think the early church had it made. In the early church, some of the members would have actually met Jesus. And many would have at least known someone who had met Jesus. Jesus's message - in its basic form - is pretty straightforward. Love God and love each other. Including yourself. At least it was simple until the Church layered 100's of years of theology on top of it. In the early church, you would not have old traditions to preserve because everything was new. In the early church nobody ever said, "we've always done it that way". St. Paul's job was easy, right? Certainly St. Paul had an easier job than Rev. Paul has today.

But actually, I invite all of us to dispel those cosy, quaint notions of the early church right now.

[image: fight church]

The early church was actually highly fragmented. And our reading today highlights part of that division. We all have to know that if St. Paul was preaching about the need for people to work together, it was not already happening. Read the Book of Acts for the whole story, but one big divide in the early church was between the members who were

Greek and the members who were Jewish. The groups had different traditions. They had different rituals. They had different ideas of what faith looked like. With leadership from St. Paul and others, they had formed a single church. But there were certainly factions. Can't you just imagine it? Theological differences, cultural difference, morality differences, language differences, ritual differences. Actually, that sounds a lot like the modern church. Perhaps St. Paul had his work cut out for him after all. And I'm sure that people did say, "we've always done it that way" in St. Paul's church. The church has never been homogeneous. I'm reminded of a story.

[image: glass bridge]

A woman was walking across a bridge one day, and she saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. She immediately ran over and said, Stop! Don't do it! The man said, Why shouldn't I? She said, Well, there's so much to live for! He said, Like what? She said, Well ... are you religious? He said, yes, I'm Christian? She said, Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant or Orthodox? - Protestant. Me too! What denomination? Baptist. She said, wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord? - Baptist Church of God. Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God - I'm Reformed Baptist Church of God. Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915? The man said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!" So the woman said, "Die, heretic", and she pushed him off the bridge.

And I'm not picking on Baptists here. There are hundreds of versions of that joke. And I'm sure that between us, we know hundreds of true stories of friction or perhaps even hatred between denominations. Between Christian denominations. Christian - you know - that religion that preaches love.

[image: diversity and inclusion]

Diversity is about embracing differences. Unity is the recognition that we share a common reality, perhaps even a common purpose. Is it even possible for us to embrace diversity and unity at the same time? Perhaps the dream of diversity and unity together is simply delusional. What do you think? Are diversity and unity actually opposites that can

never really co-exist? Perhaps diversity and unity only coexist in the mouths of politicians. Or can we find ways to honour both diversity and unity in real life?

Diversity is not easy. And I think that as a society - and as a church - we often miss the essential point of celebrating diversity. I was reminded of this as recently as Monday, while reading an article in *Russia Today*.

[image: microsoft]

I had not noticed this, but Microsoft Word has a new feature. I'm sure you know that Word has a feature that checks your spelling while you write your documents. And it has a feature that checks your grammar. Now, Word has a new feature that checks your text for inclusive language. According to Microsoft it is an attempt "to remove non-inclusive language commonly found within the technology and cybersecurity sectors".¹ For example, with this feature enabled, Word will suggest replacing "mankind" with "humankind" or "humanity".

[image: one small step]

I find that only marginally interesting, because I do not use Word myself. But I was very curious to read people's reactions to this feature. One critic said, "Microsoft says we need to say humankind instead of mankind so we don't offend someone."

And that one quote - for me - highlights what our society, and the church, often get wrong about inclusion. The critic here is claiming the he is being forced to use inclusive language *for them*. "Them" being some unknown people. That seems like a very narrow-minded way to think about inclusion. Recognition of our great diversity - in Brantford, in the church, wherever we find it is not just something we do for someone else. It is something we do for ourselves. As each of us work to become more inclusive ourselves, the biggest winner is ... ourselves.

[image: pope Francis quote]

As we become more inclusive we more closely embrace our own humanity. As we become more inclusive we more fully embrace the spirit. We more fully become who we are meant to be. We should not use inclusive language just to avoid offending people. We should use inclusive language because we honestly want to become better people. We

¹ <https://www.rt.com/news/546212-microsoft-inclusive-tool-criticism/>

should use inclusive language because we want to engage in the real world of today. We ourselves win when we open our hearts and minds to others. When our thinking is too small-minded, we are the ones who need healing, not “those other people”. The language we choose to use says nothing at all about “the other”. The language we choose to use speaks volumes about ourselves.

There is one other aspect of diversity that I think our society and our church often gets wrong. And it’s well laid out in the song “Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer”.

[image: rudolf]

In the song, Rudolf is segregated because she has a red nose. She is an outcast. No-one will play with her. Then, one Christmas Eve it’s foggy and Santa needs her red nose to see through the fog. And after that, Rudolf is accepted into the social group. But Rudolf is not accepted for being herself. She is only - finally - accepted because she is useful. She is not accepted because of her personhood, she is accepted because of her utility. That is not a celebration of diversity. That is just self-interest.

[image: open your mind]

Embracing difference is allowing our hearts and minds to expand as a result of the stimulus of the other in our midst. And then, when the other is no longer present, we do not return to our old normal. Instead we are left with a “new normal”. Inclusivity is not about how society is changing. Inclusivity is about how we ourselves are changing because we live and breath and are part of a diverse society.

Unity is not easy either. If we keep all conversations at a very vague level, then yes we can pretend that we all agree on lots of things. But when we dig deeper - as we should - we will find differences that do not simply disappear. Attempts to produce unity sometimes become doctrines of uniformity. And uniformity cannot embrace diversity. This is the United Church of Canada, not the Unified Church of Canada.

I want to share two examples from my own work in the church.

As you may know, for decades the United Church of Canada has put a lot of effort into supporting “Immigrant” United Church congregations. Sometimes, immigrant groups come to Canada in numbers, and the United Church has reached out to help them form their own congregations. We bring them into the fold of the United Church, while

allowing them to honour their own traditions at the same time. Done properly, it's a manifestation of unity and diversity. For example, in the former South West Presbytery of Toronto Conference, there were 4 Korean United Churches. One of these Korean congregations was formed around 45 years ago. It took time for the congregation to figure out its own identity. Over time, the "first generation" congregation became a multi-generation congregation. Over time, the original language - Korean - started losing its traction, particularly among younger members. Over those same 45 years, the United Church increasingly embraced more and more diversity, including gender diversity. The Korean congregations had to decide who they wanted to be and how they wanted to fit in. Korean culture was - and still is - quite conservative by Canadian standards. And about 5 years ago, one of the Korean congregations formally left the United Church to continue on a different path.

Some people at Presbytery bemoaned the decision because it demonstrated a failure to find unity. But I was one of the few who celebrated. It's not that I wanted them to leave. I was delighted that the congregation had - over time - figured out who it wanted to be and how to be in Canadian society. That's good, right? And there is no doubt that the relationship with the United Church had been a good spring-board to get the congregation established in the first place. But it's an example where unity and diversity can not always easily co-exist.

It's easy to say that we welcome everyone, and then retreat into our own little worlds. But what do we do when cultures clash?

[image: culture clash]

In 2019 I was on the interim executive of the Region where I was in ministry - now called "Shining Waters Regional Council". And we had big plans for our first Regional gathering which was in May, 2019. Our plans included honouring indigenous practices, and some of the indigenous communities that were part of the Region said that they wanted to have a ritual they call "Sacred Fire".

[image: sacred fire]

A Sacred Fire carries different connotations for different indigenous groups. But typically, a sacred fire would burn throughout an entire event. Having a Sacred Fire at our

AGM would mean having a fire that would burn continuously during the 3-day event. The fire would be maintained by selected people called “fire keepers”. And so we selected a location for our regional meeting where we were assured we could do that - Georgian College in Barrie.

But Shining Waters Regional Council was a new entity. We had other suggestions for things to do at our first ever regional meeting. I personally was pushing my own idea. Because we were gathering on a college campus, people could stay on-site in residence. So I thought the agenda should include scheduled "pub time". Time to create fellowship that included the option of alcoholic refreshments. Not only would that create opportunities for fellowship. It would also signal that the United Church was moving into the future by not only allowing but scheduling time in a pub. I was very passionate that we should have scheduled pub time on the agenda.

We had lots of good ideas proposed for our first regional meeting of course. But I want to highlight that we proposed a sacred fire. And we proposed having pub time. Those 2 ideas both sound worthwhile and interesting. Both ideas represent good cultural traditions. Both ideas are meaningful. The indigenous tradition of sacred fire and the western tradition of fellowship in a "pub" setting. What could possibly go wrong? I'm glad you asked.

It turns out that in some (not all) indigenous traditions, if you choose to host a “sacred fire”, all alcohol is banned while the fire is burning. So we could not honour the tradition of sacred fire and have an agenda that included “pub time”. The hoped for meeting that would honour both traditions could not happen.

The simple truth is that honouring both diversity and unity is usually not easy. There are cases where it is very difficult. And there are cases where it appears to be completely impossible.

[image: diversity and inclusion salad]

In the media, we usually hear about “unity in diversity”, or “diversity in unity”. Wikipedia says, “Unity in diversity is a concept of ‘unity without uniformity and diversity without fragmentation’ that shifts focus from unity based on a mere tolerance of physical, cultural, linguistic, social, religious, political, ideological and/or psychological

differences towards a more complex unity based on an understanding that difference enriches human interactions.”

[image: difference enriches human interactions]

“Difference enriches human interactions”. Do you think St. Paul was brave enough - or silly enough - to imagine that might be true for Christian congregations? Do we believe that each of us here enriches each other? Do we believe that if we embrace people we don’t know yet that we will be even more enriched? Do we actually live like we believe that?

Mainline churches in North America are dwindling today, but only if they are predominantly white. But the issue is not skin colour. It is cultural. The future of North American churches - and Sydenham-Heritage United Church - is to embrace diversity differently. We need to live into the truth that “Difference enriches human interactions”. Differences are not to be avoided, or tolerated. Differences are vehicles for our own growth and healing.

On the “Religion News” web site it says, “If there is a theme in what lies ahead for the church as we enter a new year, it is that the white Western Christian bubble that has powerfully shaped Christianity for the past four centuries is now beginning to burst. Future expressions of Christian faith will be shaped by its interactions with non-Western and nonwhite cultures. This will present challenges to the established church in the U.S. but may hold the keys to its revitalization.”²

[image: crowd]

So we are actually very fortunate here. Brantford is on a growth spurt right now. And Many of our new neighbours are non-Western and non-white. Sounds like great potential for new relationships. I’ve actually noticed a huge change even in the 2 years that I’ve been here. We are becoming more diverse as a community. The only question is, what will we as a church do with the fantastic diversity that is right outside our door.

We are the body of Christ. What more do we need? We just need to embrace the people that God has surrounded us with.

Amen.

² <https://religionnews.com/2019/01/10/where-is-christianity-headed-the-view-from-2019/>