
Body of Christ
Chapel in the Park United Church
January 26, 2025
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

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. Just like the potato heads. The message is that to maintain a strong whole we need to embrace our many different parts. In modern language, it's a call to embrace diversity within unity. 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 CITP today.

[image: early church]

But before we go get St. Paul, let us 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 it's basic form - is pretty straightforward. Love God and love each other. Including yourself. The early church did not have to deal with the 100's of years of theology that the church added later. 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, right?

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

[image: fighting in 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. Because the early church did not spring out of thin air. The early church was an evolution of previous traditions. That's traditions - plural. The early church was not homogeneous.

I was reminded of that last Monday. Because Monday was "Martin Luther King Jr. Day"

[image: Martin Luther King jr]

in the US. King had many accomplishments. But this week a clergy friend of mine reminded me about King's

[image: letter from Birmingham jail]

"Letter from Birmingham City Jail". Often referred to as simply, "Letter from Birmingham Jail".

King was in the Birmingham City Jail in 1963 because he had participated in a non-violent demonstration against segregation. While incarcerated, a statement had come from 8 white clergy - 7 ministers and 1 rabbi. They were all highly critical of King's action against segregation. The "Letter from Birmingham Jail" was King's response to those 8 white clergy. But it was really a message for the whole church.

In general, King was very critical of the church for standing by as segregation was happening, as well as outright supporting segregation. In the letter King said, "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice."

King's language was forceful. "You deplore the demonstrations that are presently

taking place in Birmingham. But I am sorry that your statement did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations into being.” King had many other choice words. “Too many [Christian leaders] have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetized security of stained-glass windows.” King also reminded those white clergy that “History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily.”

In 1 Corinthians - as we read today - St Paul said., “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and we were all made to drink of one Spirit”. And yet, the church has not always lived into that vision. In other places St Paul said, there is no longer Jew or non-Jew, man or woman, rich or poor. But still in 1963 the Christian Church in the US endorsed an arbitrary line between black people and white people. Between Black Christians and White Christians!

Diversity within unity is not easy. And it is certainly not automatic. Even within Christianity - you remember Christianity, that religion that preaches love for all people. [image: diversity inclusion salad]

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 and the clergy. 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 recently while reading an article from Russia Today that talked about ... or all things ... Microsoft Word.

[image: one small step]

I’m sure you know that Word has a feature that checks your spelling while you type. And it has a feature that checks your grammar. Well Word also has a 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”.

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.

[image: quote below]

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 that they are being forced to use inclusive language for someone else’s benefit. And I agree that inclusive language helps people formerly thought of as outsiders feel more welcome. But the criticism misses a huge point.

Because recognition of our great diversity as a society and in the church, in fact wherever we find it is not just something we do for someone else. It is something we do for ourselves too.

[image: pope Francis quote]

Because 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 other people. We should use inclusive language because we honestly want to become better people. We should use inclusive language because we want to engage in the real world of today. Everyone wins 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 people”.

[image: following quote]

The language we choose to use says nothing at all about “the other”. The language we choose to use speaks volumes about ourselves.

Embracing difference is allowing our hearts and minds to expand as a result of the

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

stimulus of the other in our midst. And then, when the other is no longer in the room, 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 Uniform Church of Canada.

[image: open your mind]

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 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 - starting losing its traction, particularly among younger members. Over those same 45 years, the United Church increasingly embraced more and more diversity, including gender diversity. Korean culture was - and still is - socially conservative by Canadian standards. The Korean congregations had to decide who they wanted to be and how they wanted to fit in. And about 10 years ago, one of the 4 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 earlier relationship with the United Church had been a helpful spring-board to get the congregation established in the first place. But it's an example where unity and diversity could not co-exist.

[image: culture clash]

It's easy to say that we welcome everyone, and then retreat into our own little worlds. But cultures actually can clash.

In 2019 I was on the interim executive of the 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 meeting 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 intentionally selected a location for our regional meeting where we were assured we could have a sacred fire - Georgian College in Barrie.

But Shining Waters Regional Council was a brand 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, most people would 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. Both ideas were optional for meeting participants. The indigenous tradition of sacred fire and the western tradition of fellowship in a "pub"

setting. What could possibly go wrong? Well, I'll tell you.

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 shoes]

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.”

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

We need to live into the truth that “Difference enriches human interactions”. Differences are not to be avoided, or tolerated. Differences are blessings. 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

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

[image: crowd]

So we are actually very fortunate here. Chapel in the Park United Church is one of the most diverse United Church congregations. But again - do we live as if our differences really enrich our lives? Perhaps we can lean into that a bit more in 2025.

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

Amen.