
The body of Christ
Martin Grove United Church
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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 like the body of Christ, 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 2019.

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 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.

I invite all of us to dispel those cosy, quaint notions of the early church right now. The early church was actually highly fragmented. And our reading today highlights part of that. 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. They had different ideas of which group should have primary status - which group should be seen as more important. With leadership from St. Paul and others, they had formed a single congregation, but there were certainly 2 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. I'm sure that people did say, "we've always done it that way" in St. Paul's church. In Corinth, there were only 2 factions. Today, there are over 45,000 different Christian denominations globally. I'm reminded of a story.

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! He 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 pushed him off the bridge.

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. And - just like in the "joke" - sometimes the people we are most similar to are the ones with which we struggle the most to tolerate.

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 co-exist only in the minds - or really, only in the words - of politicians? Or can we find ways to honour both diversity and unity in real life?

Diversity is not easy. I have noticed that sometimes, when we speak about how diverse we are, we are actually only tolerant. Sometimes we tolerate other people - essentially because we think we have to - but that is not the same as embracing

differences. Tolerating difference is saying that you will put up someone - or at least ignore them - until they go away and things can go back to normal. Sometimes we speak about diversity, but we are actually only being selfish. I absolutely hate the song, “Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer” because Rudolf is never accepted for being herself, she is only - finally - accepted because she is useful. She is not accepted because of her identity, she is only accepted because of her utility.” That is not a celebration of diversity.

Embracing difference is allowing the other to expand our own hearts and minds, and then when they go away, we are left with a “new normal”. Diversity is not about how society is changing. Diversity is about how we ourselves are changing because we live and breath in a changing 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 - like 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.

As you may know, over the past few 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. Bringing them into the fold of the United Church, while allowing them to honour their own traditions at the same time. Done properly, it’s almost an exact manifestation of unity and diversity. For example, in the former South West Presbytery, I believe there were 4 Korean United Churches. One of these Korean congregations was formed almost 40 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 the traction it used to have for its members, particularly among younger members. Over those 40 years, the United Church increasingly embraced more and more diversity. The congregation had to decide who they wanted to be and how they wanted to fit in. Korean culture was - and still is - very conservative by Canadian standards. And about 2 years ago, that Korean congregations formally left the United

Church to continue on a different path.

Some people at Presbytery bemoaned the fact 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 live 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. We were helpful in the past, and now we were invited to get out of the way. That is success in my books. But it's an example where unity and diversity could not co-exist.

It's easy to say that we embrace everyone, and then retreat into our own little worlds. But what do we do when cultures clash? Is it possible to honour both cultures?

In 2019 I anticipate the United Church (national) pushing congregations towards reconciliation with indigenous communities of faith. Our newly minted region, "Shining Waters Regional Council" is already working on that, and hopes to honour indigenous practices at regional gatherings where appropriate. There has already been discussion for what might be possible for the first AGM, held in May this year. Nothing is fixed yet, but we intentionally selected a location for the meeting that would allow for a "Sacred Fire", in case that was wanted. "Sacred Fire" carries different connotations with different indigenous groups, but typically, a sacred fire would burn throughout an event, the fire being maintained by "fire keepers". If there was a sacred fire at our AGM, it would burn continuously through the 3-day event, or perhaps even longer. Other ideas for the meeting in May are emerging too. It has been suggested that we have a "beer and hymns" event, which is a gathering that incorporates hymn singing and drinking refreshments that might include beer. It's a new worship idea that started formally in the U.K., and informally practically everywhere.

Well, those 2 ideas both sound worthwhile and interesting. Both ideas represent good cultural traditions - the tradition of the fire and the tradition of fellowship. And to have a United Church event where alcohol is allowed would certainly indicate that perhaps the church is moving into the future because even 10 years ago such an idea would likely never have been floated. However, in some indigenous traditions, if you

choose to host a “sacred fire”, all alcohol is banned during the duration of the fire. The 2 traditions - on the surface at least - appear to be incompatible. They cannot both be honoured. Diversity and unity seem to be irreconcilable in this example. And there is probably no easy answer to this. Part of me hopes this come to a head this May so we can have proper conversation about it. And I’ll let you know how this story evolves.

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 perhaps be completely impossible.

In the media, we usually hear about “unity in diversity”, or “diversity in unity”. On wikipedia it 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.”

“Differences enrich human interactions”. Do you think St. Paul was brave enough - or silly enough - to imagine that might be true for Christian congregations? Martin Grove United Church is a relatively diverse congregation. Do we believe that each of us enriches each other? Do we actually live like that? Are we open to that?

St. Paul did not just say that the church was like the body of Christ, he also said that we ARE the body of Christ. In Luke, Jesus said he was fulfilling his mandate, saying, “God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” So we are called to do the same. But this is 2019. In 2019, how will we as MGUC:

- bring good news to the poor.
- proclaim release to the captives
- bring recovery of sight to the blind
- let the oppressed go free
- proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.

How indeed! The reality is that mainline churches in North America are dwindling, but

only if they are predominantly white. But the issue is not skin colour. It is culture. The future of North American churches - and Martin Grove United Church - is to embrace diversity differently. In particular to really live into the word “embrace” when we say that we “embrace difference”. We will all be in this together - or we will not “be” at all. 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.”¹

So we are actually very fortunate here. We are already fairly diverse. And if the future of the church will come from embracing non-Western and nonwhite cultures, then surely Rexdale is a great place to be. Perhaps everything we need for the future of this congregation is right outside our own front 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.

¹ <https://religionnews.com/2019/01/10/where-is-christianity-headed-the-view-from-2019/>