



“Striving for the Greater Gifts”

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Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California*

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I Cor. 12:12-31a*

Dr. Sharon E. Jarvis, a brilliant young scholar who grew up at Eden Church, was back in town over the Christmas holidays visiting with her parents, Anne and Dick Duey. Sharon is Assistant Professor in the College of Communications, at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research and teaching are in the field of communications and politics.

As you might imagine, our conversations (when she comes home and when we exchange email) frequently turn to politics and current events. Over a late Christmas Eve dinner last month, I asked Sharon the two questions that are on the forefront of every journalist’s mind these days:

Who’s going to win in the Primaries?
Who’s going to take the Whitehouse?

Sharon was full of interesting analysis about “red states” and “blue states,” party politics, communications strategies, and the organizational dynamics of our nation’s major political parties.

We agreed that growing discontent over the war in Iraq would make a victory for Republican contenders harder to achieve than in the last two general elections. And we agreed that the Democrats’ greatest strength—diversity—was also their greatest vulnerability to success.

Although the Dems are doing pretty well in their first 100 hours of the new Congress, historically, when internal conflicts have emerged for them, the many and varied constituencies that comprise the party struggle to find common ground, and as a result, tremendous resources are spent striving for consensus, as the patience of the party faithful is stretched to the max, and the party loses their ability to attract a broader base of support from the general public. Meanwhile, contenders move swiftly toward victory in the polls and on capital hill.

Sharon's mother, Anne, an astute practical theologian, accurately observed that the Dems do not have the "corner of the market" in the struggle over unity and diversity. Anne rightly explained to Sharon that churches like ours—which grant every member a vote and do not require adherence to a prescribed set of beliefs—are also notorious for our struggles over unity and diversity.

As a church and denomination, sometimes we rise to these challenges with brilliant success, so that God is glorified and the mission of Christ is advanced. And sometimes we muck things up so badly that only God's grace could forgive, and only divine intervention could guarantee the future of our faith.

So today's sermon begins with a confession and a caution to the uninitiated, and with a recognition that the Apostle Paul could just as easily have been writing to the Democratic Party, or the United Church of Christ as, writing to the early Corinthian church.

II

I've always been fascinated by the ancient city of Corinth and the early church in that venue. Part of the current intrigue for me are the surprising similarities between the two communities: Corinth and environs, and the San Francisco Bay Area.

Though San Francisco is not the capital of the state, as Corinth was of the capital of its Roman province (Achaia), both cities are known as prosperous urban sea ports populated by citizens representing a vast array of ethnicities, cultures, and religious groups.

Modern marketing experts might say that Corinth was a great place to test and launch a new brand of religion like Christianity. Perhaps Paul had an intuitive genius and sensed the promise of Corinth, or perhaps his decision to found a church at Corinth was guided by divine inspiration. In either case, Corinth proved to be the most challenging of his new church starts—no doubt partly because of the church's heterogeneous constituency and its complex setting.

Paul founded the church at Corinth in the late 40s A.D. Among its members were Prisca and Aquila (the first clergy couple), and a few well-heeled, influential citizens of Rome. But, like most of the early congregations, the vast majority of Corinthian Christians were of simple means and modest social standing.

Archeologists surmise that church members lived in small groups throughout Corinth, and gathered for a common meal and worship on a regular basis—most likely at the home or homes of their most prosperous members, since those homes were the only buildings available to the Christians that were large enough for church gatherings.

Paul wrote I Corinthians in the mid 50s from Ephesus, and sent Timothy to deliver the epistle to its intended recipients. The letter deals broadly with issues of unity and diversity, which were expressed as disputes about correct beliefs and behavior, Paul's authority as a leader, and power struggles among the members.

Chapter 12, which Bill Coburn read from today, is a crystallization of Paul's core teachings, in which he summons the congregation to unity and concord by reminding them that they were all baptized into one body—the body of Christ—and that regardless of their respective social locations, every member played a crucial part in the church.¹

The core of Paul's teaching is summed up in the following five verses:

¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many... ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be?... ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it... ²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. So strive for the greater gifts [which build up the body of Christ.]²

Here Paul emphasizes the need for respect and appreciation of each others' gifts and says that the litmus test by which all gifts are measured is this: does it build up the body of Christ—which is the church? Does the gift make the whole stronger? Does it advance the mission of Christ?

If the answer to these questions is "Yes," then that respective gift is one of the "greater gifts." If the answer is "No," as was the case with speaking in tongues, for example, then the gift in question is of less importance.

III

My high school basketball coach, Marvin Cook, understood the need for unity and diversity, and he may well have been paraphrasing Paul when he said in our team huddles, "People, basketball is a team sport. If we are going to win, we'll have to play together!"

Pretty much everything good that I learned about coaching I learned from Marvin Cook.

During my senior year in college, an opportunity to demonstrate that learning came as I was invited to serve as the interim pastor for two rural UCC churches

¹ Victor Paul Furnish, "Introduction to I Corinthians," in the HarperCollins Study Bible, NRSV, HarperCollins: New York City, 1993, 2139-2141.

² I Cor. 12: 12-14, 19, 26-27

in Sheboygan County, Wisconsin. Both were populated by members who made their living as dairy farmers and cheese factory workers.

Little did I know when signing up for the job that it included coaching their co-ed youth volleyball team for the summer. This was no small undertaking. My team, the “Spirits,” had finished 25th in a field of 25 the previous summer, and despite that disappointing finish, the youth and their parents took church volleyball very seriously.

There wasn’t much to do in the summers in rural Wisconsin once the cows were milked and the 4-H calves were groomed, except play church volleyball. It was the kids’ primary form of recreation.

Had the kids and their parents known that I had never actually played volleyball competitively, I might never have gotten the job. But, they didn’t. I got the job, and what follows is a summary of our season.

I decided to take the advice of Coach Cook about team work, and the guidance of my high school band director, Dan Dejern, who said, “Fake it ‘till you make it!”

That summer—the summer of ‘85—the kids and I rebuilt the Spirits’ volleyball program based on three principles:

- 1) Learn and implement the fundamentals of volleyball.
- 2) Play as a team.
- 3) Don’t swear.

I explained to the kids that every team would learn the fundamentals of volleyball, and that swearing would get us kicked out of the league. So the only thing that would make us special, and keep us on the road to success, was playing as a team, which meant to attend all practices and games, give our best effort, and support each other on and off the court.

I noticed at the first practice that the kids were pretty hard on themselves and each other when they made mistakes. My friend Dr. Sue Zeigler, a sports psychologist at Cleveland State University, would say that “negative self-talk” and “intra-team conflict” is the death of any athletic career and potential for team success. At the time that I was making my volleyball coaching debut, I didn’t know much about sports psychology. I just figured that abusive talk wasn’t Christian and that eliminating it from our team culture would make us better people, even if it didn’t make us better volleyball players.

I had no idea whether my coaching strategy would work, but it was all I had to go on. So I faked it until we made it—to the Sheboygan County Volleyball finals—where the Spirits took second place.

The kids were demoralized when we didn't win the championship, but I figured considering where we started from that it was a miracle that we made it out of the first bracket in the tournament.

Moreover, I thought it was more important that the team culture change than that we win any trophies, because those kids wouldn't be playing volleyball much longer. But they would soon be sitting together around the Consistory table trying to figure out how to advance the ministry of the congregation that their great-grandparents had founded and that one day, God willing, their own great-grandchildren would lead.

IV

Effective coaches and music directors know acutely the importance of unity—whether we're talking “team” or “ensemble”—*and* they also know the importance of diversity—whether we're dealing in “special teams” or “strong sections.”

Successful managers also know about the importance of unity and diversity. For example, noted author and business consultant, Brian Anderson, teaches executives about the difference between problems to be solved, and polarities to be managed. He says that *problems* require decisions which result in a choice between two or more options, while *polarities* require a balancing act between two or more values that can't (or shouldn't) be dismissed. Though Anderson does not write from a faith-based perspective, I believe that he would say that unity and diversity are not problems to be solved; they are polarities to be managed.

Whether we are concerned with the dynamics associated with unity and diversity within political parties, the behavior of ancient or modern Christian communities, or our own family members' athletic teams, we must strive to find a balance between unity and diversity in order to fulfill our purposes.

V

How, in God's name, do we achieve this balance?

I suspect that we will not find this balance between unity and diversity solely by reading political science books, taking coaching classes, or implementing management techniques.

Instead, I suspect that we must proceed on a spiritual path that begins with an appreciation for people's gifts and needs, and leads into the heart and soul of our faith community and our members.

Such a journey requires that we acknowledge old wounds in need of healing and take stock of the empty places that may need filling—hurts and hollows that foster a sense of scarcity and isolation in us. Once we have taken stock of our

needs, we can name and open them to God in prayer and give the Spirit a chance to work on, in, and through us, until we are filled with a sense of God's abundant grace and love of ourselves and our whole community, and no longer need to control outcomes, diminish the needs others, or demean those who are differently gifted from us.

So this is my prayer for us today: that we may journey inward, acknowledging our own needs, and allowing God's Spirit to work in and through us, so that we might then believe in our belovedness, celebrate the special gift that we each are, and see what a gift God has given in those who seem utterly foreign to us.

As we pray this prayer, and strive to be the answer to it, I trust that we will live into Paul's vision of the church, and fulfill our calling to be the whole and holy body of Christ, and God will surely be glorified. Amen.