

## **"WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?; DIVERSITY IN THE CARING COMMUNITY"**

A Sermon delivered at St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, Virginia

On January 26/27, 2013, Third Sunday after Epiphany (Epiph. 3C-13)

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Dear diverse members of the united caring community that is St. John's:

What a diverse group we are. Think for a moment. None of us look exactly the same; there are differences even among "identical" twins. We don't act the same at least most of the time. We come from diverse geographical areas have diverse jobs and occupations. We have diverse interests and diverse talents. In fact, the one same thing that could be said is that we are all different. Why you even have a different preacher today to add to that mix of diversity.

On this third Sunday after Epiphany, our "Being SJLC" series continues to ask the question, "Who is my neighbor?" And more importantly, what is my response and responsibility to that neighbor that I have identified as a member of this caring community? Today, with the scriptural assistance of St. Paul's advice to the caring community in Corinth centuries ago, I invite you to look at the paths and the pitfalls of diversity within the caring community.

There is something about diversity that can be both positive and enhancing, as well as negative and a bit scary. Each of us (as I said) is unique and diverse right down to the mold of our finger prints and the stuff of our DNA. Our environment took over where heredity has already put its stamp to produce the one-of-a-kind person you are and I am today. However, are we always able to celebrate -- without caveats, changes, or exceptions -- every part of our own uniqueness?

I find that when many people reflect on the size and shape of their anatomy or examine themselves in the mirror, they often find something there they don't like, something they would like to change. In many cases this can be some trifle, some minute little thing that no one else even notices, a perceived imperfection, and the longer they dote on whatever that is, the more they begin to obsess over it until they exaggerate that one feature completely out of proportion. "When people look at me, that's all they see," is their conclusion. This becomes a preoccupation so that all they can think of and fret about is the shape or curvature of their nose, the color or shape of their eyes, the size of their ears, the droop of their eyelids, the wrinkles and turkey neck that advance with age and that's just the beginning. It's no wonder that the cosmetic industry is thriving even in an economic depression, that chic fashions become increasingly absurd, and the uninsured expense of plastic or cosmetic surgery is an alternative to which so many are willing to turn.

In today's epistle reading, St. Paul outlines some of the pitfalls of diversity by creating a cartoon fantasy that rivals Walt Disney Productions. He animates parts of your diverse body -- a body he already says is a model of the church -- and asks what it would be like if any of one's body parts could speak about their dissatisfaction with their intended function. What if your foot would suddenly declared, "I don't like being a foot anymore. I bare your body weight all day and that give me calluses. I get smelly stuffed inside of your shoes all day, and you carelessly keep stubbing my toes and stepping on rough surfaces. Oh, the pain!!! I've had it being a foot. From henceforth I want to be a hand." Paul continues this fantasy trip in the rebellion of the body parts with the eyes, nose, and ears until no one is able to escape the absurdity and negativity of this ridiculous cartoon that leads to his conclusion: *"So there may be no division in the body, but its parts should have equal concern for one another. If one part suffers, all suffer together with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices together with it"* (vss. 25-26). That's the wonder and purpose of diversity within the caring community.

In the body that is the Church we celebrate that diversity when it is positive, when it benefits and contributes to the whole of the Church's purpose and mission. I recall a day in my ministry as an army chaplain when I was assigned to the teaching faculty of the Chaplain School. One day we were all asked to take what we thought was a personality test. It turns out it was the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. If you've taken it, you know what I mean. Your answers measure preferences that then describe your preferred behavior so that you wind up with four letters that represent those preferences. I will never forget when the TRADOC chaplain – a friend and fellow Lutheran – placed my results in front of me. With an intent but loving stare, he said, "Ben, how have you ever managed to survive in the army?"

It turns out my personality type is completely the opposite of most military people. In fact, when I discovered my diversity in an otherwise monolithic community, I became much more comfortable what I could contribute by asking the questions and offering possibilities others had not even considered. I can't help but wonder were there more diversity within the political parties of our government could it lead us out of the impasse we currently face.

Certainly it was God's divine diversity that presented the plan for escaping the even more difficult impasse the estranged world was facing. How does a disfigured, dysfunctional, and destitute creation reestablish its relationship with a loving creator? As part of that monolithic community, we all are part of that same failed, broken, and helpless community. Then God sent a diverse and different entity in the person of his own beloved Son, who was anointed to proclaim good news to the poor (that's you and me), liberty to the captives (that's you and me), recovery of sight and liberty to the oppressed (that's you and me). In today's Gospel lesson he could proclaim that it was done but the world still had to wait until his body was broken beyond recognition as it became a magnet for the warts of our sin and the imperfections of our death-bound body that was bound up in his death on the cross. His resurrected body portrays the beauty of our baptismal body that allows us, that compels us to use our inherited diversity to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor to the poor, the captives, the physically handicapped and oppressed. Each one is my neighbor. Since Christ has paid the principal on our mortgage, serving is the only small amount of interest that he requires.

The question is, "What diverse gift do you have that will contribute to the entire community and how do you allow others to utilize those gifts. As you leave today's worship service, you are asked to take home a card to be filled out and returned two weeks from this weekend (Feb 9/10). Prayerfully consider the diverse gifts that are yours. Be bold! Be creative! Don't be limited by what you think the serving community needs -- Paul's list of Apostles, Prophets, teachers, etc., is just the tip of the iceberg -- but what new ministry your gift of diversity can foster that can be woven into the tapestry of serving your neighbor. Write them down and design how you can and will put them into practice as you discover the needs of the neighbor next to you whoever and wherever that might be. Our series continues next week as Paul leads us into the more excellent way. I wonder what he could be talking about. Be here for that. Amen