

Variety
I Corinthians 12: 4-13, 27-31

Picture a large red refrigerator being placed on a busy street in a large city. Curious bystanders began to gather around it. The refrigerator has a sign letting everyone know that inside its door is a cadre of ice cold Molson Canadian beer. There are instructions on how to open the door. Repeat the words, 'I am Canadian', into the speaker. That is the opening of an ad from Molson Canadian from a few years ago. Their campaign centered around the vast diversity that is Canada. Earlier commercials had focused on the different geography, sports and recreation, and cultural activities that typify our neighbor to the north. They were resounding successes as people rallied around a central theme: no matter how different, everyone was united by their Canadian identity. Sometimes, though, the call to unity can obscure the wealth of differences that comprise concord. So more commercials ensued taking 'I am Canadian' to a richer, deeper, more complex unity.

As those who encountered the refrigerator on a street in Toronto discovered, it took a bit more than simply one person stating, 'I am Canadian.' One after another different folks tried, repeating over and over again, 'I am Canadian'. But the door would not budge! Someone had an idea then to say 'I am Canadian' in a different language. With the excitement growing a variety of voices began to ring out. "Je suis canadienne," "Ich bin Kanadierin," "Soy canadiense." A flow of languages of the world poured out as people enthusiastically grabbed the opportunity to use their own unique identity in a collaborative celebration. The door opened, and everyone got to enjoy a refreshing cool beer, a welcome respite on a hot summer day. People coming together, pooling their talents and ingenuity, for a common goal.

Varieties of gifts but the same Spirit. Varieties of services but the same Lord. Varieties of activities but the same God. Paul was not describing a beer commercial supporting the unity of a nation but the Body of Christ, the Church, the people in Corinth. They had the variety part down well. Even in their faith expressions they aligned themselves with different leaders who

had been part of their fellowship - Apollos, Cephas, Paul. Class and economic divisions split the unity of the Lord's Supper. Like many of their time, the Corinthians adopted the Graeco-Roman philosophy that even the self was divided into body and soul, creating separation even within individuals. Divisions from society, divisions within the body of believers, even internal division dominated their life together. Paul certainly had quite the undertaking in showing the Corinthians that the beauty of their various unique natures could be interlaced into one entity. That was the focal point of this first letter to the church at Corinth. Out of many one, or in Latin, *e pluribus unum*, the motto of this country until 1956. As Paul attested in his ministry to the Corinthians, it was a much more challenging task to create one out of many in the intimate setting of a church with all its different personalities than it was for a group of strangers to find their voices to open up a refrigerator of beer!

We are all so very different here. Of course, there is much commonality as well in ethnicity, in educational level, in socioeconomic status. In those ways, we are fairly homogenous. But look beneath the surface and you will find an overflowing cornucopia of unique and colorful people. What we like in music, how we spend our spare time, the occupations we have had over the years, the homes in which we live - the differences are many and varied. We each bring a gift others might not share, a perspective others might not even know, ideas we never even considered. The purpose of all our disparities is to take them and create something stronger, better, more beautiful than if we were all alike. We do it, because that is how we were created in God's own image. The role of church is to not only bring what we have to offer but to encourage and nurture others as they discover gifts and talents within themselves. Here we bring out the best in one another, we help people believe in themselves, we celebrate the varied differences, gifts, and talents, because we know it will take all of us being fully who we are to become the living presence of God in this world.

That was beautifully illustrated in the movie we saw Friday night. Florence Foster Jenkins was a woman with a passion for music. She poured her numerous resources and her

soul into making the gift of music widely available. Beyond all her generosity in opening up the world of music, she also loved to sing; and she wanted to perform in concert so all could enjoy what was to her so clear. The problem was her voice was not so great in the eyes of music aficionados. She was well-trained by some of the best vocal teachers of the times, but what came out was not necessarily a source of pleasure for others. She persisted, though.

Accompanied by a team who were quite aware of her limitations as a vocalist, she presented a concert at Carnegie Hall. After all, why have a small, intimate concert in one's living room when one could rent the grandest musical venue of all times?

The purpose of the concert was to create joy for the soldiers who had been involved in WWII and to honor the sacrifices they and their families had made. Truly a noble cause! But it was also to provide an avenue by which Florence could share her passion for music. At first, her listeners were enthralled. Well, for a few notes anyway. Then the obvious became even more overt as people began to point out that Florence could not sing. There were jeers, laughter, even walkouts as the negativity seeped through the crowd. Until one woman, who was definitely not a fan of classical music in any form or fashion and who had also blatantly laughed at Florence in another setting, realized that this was more than about Florence's musical ability. This was about the joy of coming together, the deep pleasure of organizing to create memories, and the honoring of one another's uniqueness. No doubt, singing was not Florence's gift but the love of music was. The woman who urged the others to support Florence as she sang her heart out in Carnegie Hall was an outsider, one ridiculed by others for being a gold-digger, and one who knew little about music other than the latest fad. The accompanist was a young man who was not trained in the traditional quality schools of the Northeast but had come from the most unlikely of places - Texas. His style was not boisterous and loud like was popular in that era but gentle and soothing. And Florence's faithful partner was a bit of cad, a mediocre actor who lived vicariously through Florence. All people with many flaws and

limitations but who somehow or other recognized and brought out the best in one another to create an atmosphere of accomplishment and joy.

As I watched the movie Friday night I realized that was such an apt description of church, a reflection of this 12th chapter of the first letter to the Corinthians in which Paul wrote of the various gifts and differences within the church, the treasure of talents that was within them, and the one body that arose out of the sea of divergent personalities. "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it," Paul wrote to the people of Corinth.¹ It is the body of God that comes into existence and thrives when the individuality of each person is honored and encouraged, when there is room for everyone to become their best selves - even if the process may take awhile.

Just as the words of Paul were written to a specific group of people within the greater Church that was still developing, so do they continue to speak to us in our fluid context of Church today. As we look into our future, Paul's picture of the church as one and many still holds true. We are not all alike, we don't all agree on everything, we do not walk in uniformed lockstep through this journey of life. Yet what we build together is more like the Body that God intended than if we were uniform and even. What one cannot do, another can. What one does not believe they can do, others can help them recognize the gift within themselves and help bring it to the forefront. Our lives interlock, sometimes in jerky staccato movements, other times in smooth legato flowing, but always in the humble acknowledgement that we are part of something greater than ourselves and that we have a call to be there for another as we embrace the stunning variety of who we are.

What can we each do to acknowledge the gifts among us? Sometimes it is easy to spotlight gifts in others; other times, as with Florence Foster Jenkins, it is an effort to see beyond the obvious to discover the greater gift. Most challenging, though, is to see the treasures within ourselves, whether it be as individuals, a community of faith, or the Church in

¹ | Corinthians 12: 27 NRSV

today's world. That is the gift we can give ourselves, one another, and the world - acknowledging that God has created each of us with beauty, with talents, with offerings that are all necessary parts of who we can become as God's creation. As a community of faith that is what we do. We look for the treasures that exist among and within us, we make this a place where others can find the best parts of themselves, we live in grateful and graceful awareness that together we are so much more than we are on our own.

Toward the end of the service we will be ordaining and installing new officers in and for this congregation. Each person has been chosen by this congregation through the breathing of God's Spirit because it has been noticed that each of them have skills and gifts that will enable us to be the Church that God knows we can be, the Church that we - and all the world - need. What we find within ourselves and recognize in others, what we each bring to the Table of God's grace, what we extend to the world is our part of the Body of Christ. All of us working together point beyond ourselves to a greater gift, or as Paul stated it, "a still more excellent way."² What we become is the very love of God. The next chapter of I Corinthians opens with the oh, so familiar, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal...."³ That is the goal of all our strivings, our differences, our unities, our identities - the love of God becoming real and tangible for the world.

Look around at the people here, hold in your hearts the ones who are not present, look within your own soul - what are the gifts we each bring? How can we encourage one another to explore the beautiful terrain of our one-and-only selves? There is a mutuality in being part of the Body of Christ. We need one another to exist. But also need one another to learn who we can become and who we are as God's good creation. Amen.

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² I Corinthians 12: 31b NRSV

³ I Corinthians 13: 1 NRSV