

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, January 14, 2017
The Rev. Dr. David Thompson
All different; All one!
“A little child shall lead them”

Today I wish to talk with you about how we are connected to each other in the church.

But first I want to tell you about a little girl who was watching a preacher who was connected to the sound system, but with a problem or two. The preacher was wired for sound with a corded mike, and as he preached, he moved briskly about the platform, jerking the mike cord as he went. Then he moved to one side, got himself wound up in the cord and nearly tripped before jerking it again. After several circles and jerks like this, a little girl in the third pew leaned toward her mother and whispered, "If he gets loose, will he hurt us?"

The church is supposed to be different from many organizations. The original vision is so very different and a whole lot more difficult, than the temptation that is still with us! You see, it is so much easier to build an organization of people who look alike and see the world the same way, rather than to build a Church based on what St. Paul had in mind.

What is the temptation? To build a voluntary association **of likeminded individuals**. That is the temptation! If we want to build a church that is say against homosexuals and the GLBTQ community and gather like minded individuals together, that is relatively easy. If I want to build a church that is full of Anglo Saxons and white people who are all middle class, educated and fairly prosperous that too is relatively easy. But if we want to build a church that is truly diverse we are likely to encounter **differences**; differences between groups in the church and those differences may indeed create factions around particular issues.

This was the problem St. Paul encountered in Corinth. There were a lot of factions in that church, some loyal to St. Paul, some loyal to Apollos, some loyal to Peter, some saying that they belonged to Christ only. There were Jews there and Gentiles, traders, merchants, sailors, people of **different** economic classes and **different nationalities**. Corinth was a diverse ship building sea port. At one time 90,000 people lived there. So, Paul had to really think about how to make diversity work in this thing he called “Church”. So he talked about the human body and its various organs...**all different and all one**. The hand can't say to the arm I don't need you or the arm say to the ear I don't need you. Because you are a hand you can't say to the rest of the body I don't belong. Hands and feet don't join the body because they relate to the world in the same way and hold similar beliefs. Ears and ribs don't affiliate because they share similar views. Neither does the church come together like that, says St. Paul. **The church is a place where unconditional love for each other and for God and the neighbor brings us all together**. The church as one diverse body of **different people**, who are unlike one another is **a very radical way** to put an organization together. But that is the mission and that is the challenge!

It is so easy to give up on that vision and just form homogeneous groups, but that, says St. Paul sunders the body of Christ and means basically that Jesus died in vain. His ideals will be lost. It was Jesus who embraced difference with his message. He collected together donkey drivers, muleteers, tax collectors, prostitutes and the so-called sinners of the day, like publicans and gentiles, into his circle. He taught us that we were to love our enemies and to do good to those who used us spitefully. Levi was a tax collector and in those days tax collectors were collaborators with Rome who sold out their own people. Yet Levi ended up becoming one of Jesus' disciples... Jesus also drafted Simon the Zealot who was a resistance fighter sworn to overthrow Rome. And Jesus picked up some lowly fishermen... What a rag tag and bobtail lot! And then He empowered powerless women! Jesus brought in Mary of Magdala who had a dubious reputation. She became the first witness to the Resurrection...no small honor that one!

In John's Gospel, Jesus is recorded as saying that He was the vine and the members of the group he was forming **were branches**. The life blood came from the vine and being connected to the vine. The life did not come from the branches. In St. Paul's metaphor the head of the body is Christ and Christ is accessed as leader through the Holy Spirit, who witnesses with our spirits to lead us into the truth that sets us free. So there is no, on the ground, congregational leader, that we can elect to act as CEO in the Church's organization. The true head of the church is spiritual...Christ is the head. **That is why the church is like no other organization**. The Lion's club or the Rotarians or the refugee resettlement organizations or any other human organizations are essentially different. The church's unity and effectiveness lies elsewhere.

So how does leadership ever work at all in the church? The leadership comes from following the **values** of Jesus, and bringing people who are different into loving relationship with God and each other is right up there in the hierarchy of things that Jesus values. **So is forgiveness**. (70 x 7 we are to forgive each other in the church.) **So is prayer**. We are to pray and ask for direction in the church and then we are to **listen** to one another speaking our diverse truths. We also listen to the Holy Spirit who has promised to lead us into the truth that sets us free. How do we experience truth in the church? Well if it is not the truth we will **not** be set free. If it is the truth we will know it in our gut, because we will **feel** incredibly free.

What is amazing to me is how the church's original organizational principles actually reflect the way forward in a complex world. The world is full of factions and dissimilar groups, lobbyists, different races and peoples from different backgrounds and special interests. We constantly divide and split into factions. We fight a lot, both internationally and locally. We split between Left and Right and the Middle and elect leaders who will support our likeminded values in a political party. But is that the way forward? It cost us billions of dollars to choose to fight rather than cooperate with each other in the world, and peace become elusive. We do this often in the church as well, choosing to split and divide over doctrine and people who disagree with us. But when we do that we lose the true vision of the church.

So, what's the **Good** news? C. S. Lewis once pointed out that the **church is that body in which all members, however different, must share the common life, complementing and helping one another, precisely by our differences.** In this regard New St. James has reached out to the Karen community and other refugee groups in an exemplary way. We share a common life together, we compliment each other and we help one another. I was attending a meeting lead by John Stewart held to help settle refugee families in the London area. The vision is extraordinary, because the differences are real and are **welcomed!** Differences can compliment each other! Who knew?

Well, very frequently lovers know. Lovers who are very different can become husbands and wives and get together because of complimentary differences. And their children have modelled before them just how to handle differences; why just the same way as Mom and Dad do! Often in wedding ceremonies I Corinthians 13 is read. But while it is appropriate for a wedding, actually it was written for a church that was based **deliberately on Diversity and inclusion.**

If I don't have love I am a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. If I have all knowledge and understand all mysteries and I have faith to move mountains but do not have love I am nothing. If I give away everything I have, if I sacrifice my body but have not love I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious, boastful or rude. It doesn't insist on its own way. Think about that one in the church. Do we give in? Do we forbear with one another? Love bears all things, believes all things and hopes all things. 😊 So, both in the church and in the diverse world in which we live on a daily basis, according to St. Paul, **love is the way forward.** Consider what the United Nations could be like, as an organization, if Love and compassion were considered to be the way forward to handle diversity and difference! What a wonderful world it could be!

David Diamond a teacher of third grade in the Adirondacks tells this story. Katie, a third grader, was a model student. She was never late, always did her homework and was never a behaviour problem. But Katie was in **Big** trouble with her parents. She was charging up a lunch in the school cafeteria and then eating it. But her parents gave her a delicious lunch everyday and did not allow her to spend in the school cafeteria, yet everyday she charged a lunch anyway. There was a school rule that if you did not come with a lunch your parents would be charged for a lunch, so no child would be without a lunch. Every day Katie showed up without a lunch. Her parents sat down with her to sort it out, but the next month another bill came from the school to her parents. It was so unlike Katie to defy her parents but that was what she was doing. So, her parents asked for help from David Diamond in his role as her teacher. He asked Katie to sit with him during recess to try to get to the bottom of the problem. He took a stern manner with her but she was a rock. She wouldn't crack and she would not tell him what she was doing. He asked her what she was doing with the lunch her mother packed for her? She said matter of factly, that she lost it. "Every day?" Said Diamond. "Every day" said Katie. "Katie, I don't believe you." Katie just sat there and David Diamond was not used to being ignored so he took another tack. "Is someone stealing your lunch Katie? If someone is bullying you and stealing your lunch I can help you!" "Nope" said Katie, "I just lose it." Diamond knew that Katie had him. He could not get it out of her and because of the

lunch rule her family would have to pay the charges as long as Katie asked for a lunch. Diamond called her parents. They bounced off theories against one another with no solution. The parents tried everything they knew to discipline Katie including grounding her. But Katie didn't care that her parents and David Diamond were disappointed in her. The problem was still unresolved the following week when Diamond noticed a boy who was new to the school. This boy always sat alone and none of the other kids reached out to him. **You see, he was different...**different...different. For instance he always looked sad. So Diamond thought he would go and sit with him for a few minutes. As he walked towards him he noticed a lunch bag on the table in front of him marked with a name on it. He glanced at it and saw the name... 'Katie'... The boy was munching away on a big delicious homemade sandwich. Now Diamond understood. He had a talk with Katie that afternoon. It seemed the new boy never brought a lunch and he wouldn't go into the lunch line for a free lunch. He had confided in Katie that his parents would never go for a 'handout' from the school. And if he did charge a lunch he would be in a lot of trouble at home. Katie begged Diamond not to tell her parents. She was afraid that would be the end of the lunch for the boy. But Diamond made no such promise. In fact, he drove to Katie's house that evening after he was sure that she was in bed. After he told them what was afoot he said that he had never in all his experience...*ever seen parents so proud of their child!* You see Katie hadn't cared that her parents had grounded her or that her teacher had been disappointed in her. Instead, despite negative peer pressure, parental pressure and all the pressure her teacher could muster, she had reached out to someone who was different. She had stood firm for love... she had cared for a little lost boy who was hungry and scared who was keeping his embarrassment a secret from all but Katie. Katie did continue everyday to buy her lunch at school. And everyday when she went out the door, her mom handed her a delicious homemade lunch.

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