

Jesus followers in Corinth were quite a messy bunch of characters. Paul's letters to these folks are so full of passion – he must have loved them dearly to put so much energy into trying to help them sort themselves out.

This community was made up of people from very different religious and cultural backgrounds... there were the God-fearing Jewish folks, the followers of Greek mythologies and other religious traditions from all around the Roman Empire.

There were wealthy merchants and their families along with Roman Soldiers and their slaves... and ex-slaves who'd either bought or been given their freedom.

In his letters to them, Paul is responding to a whole list of complaints from this very young church family, trying to figure out how to be together without imploding... or exploding.

They were fighting about... everything... from who the best leader would be to what their religious practices should look like. These folks were filled with the Holy Spirit with all of its wild and wonderful manifestations.

In the first part of the reading you heard this morning, Paul is talking about these spiritual gifts and it seems as though he was addressing some pride that had perhaps been attached to certain gifts. He wanted to emphasize two things: first... these were gifts of the Holy Spirit, not personal assets or achievements. Did you know that the Greek word for "gift" has the same root for "grace"? Spiritual gifts are an extension of God's grace – not something you can put in a pretty little box and tie with a bow.

Second, Paul wanted to emphasize, that all of the gifts – especially the more showy ones – needed to build up the entire community... not puff up one individual – or a group of individuals within the community.

Doesn't matter which gift someone received – all of them had to be secondary to the gift – to the grace – of Jesus and the peace.. justice and amazing love he brought to the world.

So that's the first part of the reading... in the second part, Paul moves into a metaphor that continues to hold meaning for the followers of Christ... the metaphor of the whole community of Jesus-followers as members of Christ's own body and this body... like the body of any living being, has many different parts— but it is one body. Paul goes into a humorous little rant about different body

parts having it out with each other... the eye telling off the hand and the head telling the foot it's fired.

Amusing to read... but it's so much more than just a funny story. Back in Paul's day, the metaphor of the body and its different parts was commonly used to explain the "natural" laws of the Empire. This metaphor actually was used to present a hierarchy – with Caesar as the divine head and the rest of the Empire the other, less significant parts of the body. This metaphor was used at all levels of the hierarchy of society – a master was head of the household, the other family members were other, less important but still quiet attractive parts of the body, and the slaves, well, they were the blistered, callused and cut up hard working but less important parts of the body.

And.. this metaphor was used to show how dissent of any sort, especially by the less important, less attractive parts of the body... was against the "natural" order and would for sure bring sickness and death to the rest of the body.

And then Paul comes along and takes this hierarchical body metaphor and replaces it with something much more organic and equitable. In Paul's metaphor there are no parts more or less important than others... one part of the body must never lift its unique gifts and abilities over any other part. In the body of Christ, power was to be held in a supportive, circular manner... not top down. In these new communities of Jesus followers, everyone of influence was to use their power and influence to build up and serve those who had no honour or power outside of the family of faith – outside the Body of Christ. So it's no wonder the early Christian communities grew by leaps and bounds among the slave and lower servant classes.

Now as you might imagine... this new image of the body, did not make the early Christian communities very popular among the powerful in the Roman Empire and what followed was mass persecution of the early communities of Jesus followers.

Today... we – here in Canada anyway... are no longer persecuted for choosing to follow Christ – BUT- the push to forget or ignore the radical call of Christian community to honour and serve the last and the least among us is real. The

metaphor offered by Paul was counter-cultural then and it is counter-cultural now.

As we celebrate Christian Family Sunday... and as we prepare for our Annual family meeting... also known as an AGM... on May 29th... and Carlyle prepares for their own meeting today... how do these words of Paul to the Corinthians speak to us here today?

For a very long time now... over two years... we have spent wayyyy more time apart, than together. Maybe now our mental picture of church family looks more like the gallery view of a Zoom Call... each of us in our own little squares... rather than a group photo of everyone gathered together, shoulder to shoulder in our beautiful sanctuary – or in Carlyle... in Radville's beautiful sanctuary.

But now is a time for us to imagine and re-imagine who we are... how we are... what we prioritize... as one body... one family. As we look at our building... our programs... how we put ourselves out there to the wider community... as we look at the changes we have made to how we participate and share in worship... I think we need to focus our thoughts not on how all of this impacts us individually but rather on how what we have... and who we are... and what we do serves the needs of the wider community. This is what Paul is passionately asking the people of Corinth to do.

This reading from Corinthians offers that perspective... of being a family... or a collective... rather than a bunch of isolated individuals each in our own little Zoom box. At the same time it also lifts up the gifts of the spirit given to each one of us... and the very different pieces of work that need to be done for the body to fully function. Sometimes we need the work of the heart and mind but we also need lots of work done by hands and feet, not to mention some fire in the belly and a fair bit of backbone.

So as you receive and read the annual reports, I invite you to imagine your experience, your skills, your Spiritual gifts, your calling, being used in new ways.

Recently I was reading an article about thriving communities of faith. I read that these communities... the ones that are thriving... are the ones that have reclaimed the call to BE the body of Christ in the world. Whether they started out as big churches or small churches or were some brand new community, those that are healthiest are the ones who focus on service and upholding and honouring those who have suffered the most in our society and culture.

It is my hope and prayer that as we reflect on what has been and what is and try to discern where God is calling us to go, that we will be reminded of those early Christian Communities and the radical message of Paul's metaphor of the body of Christ... and that we will keep our hearts open... our minds questioning... and our bodies ready to serve in whatever ways we may be called.

Amen.