

## EPIPHANY 3, JAN. 27, 2019, Year C

- Think for a moment about [the Church](#) throughout the world. Which of these two words come to mind ~ *difference*, **or sameness**? I ask this because, when we look at [other things](#) in the world, [both sameness](#) and [difference](#) are important *reference points* for us.
- For example, when we look *in a scientific way* at any aspect of this world, [things that are the same, repeatably observable and common](#), are of huge importance. *Yet*, when seeking a relationship with a fellow human being, [that which is different](#) about another person attracts our interest. *In one context*, we look for [what is the same](#); and in another, we look for [what is different](#).
- *Despite our individual preferences*, [our society has moved toward giving priority to one of these two perspectives](#). [Diversity](#) has become the watchword, and is now seen as having a *higher value* than [sameness and commonality](#). Unfortunately, the use of these words has become [politicized](#), and therefore also [polarized](#). So, it's more difficult for us to think about these qualities in a reasoned and dispassionate way. And yet, [these terms are significant](#) because they are so relevant to our concept of the Church, and how we understand Paul's words in 1 Corinthians.<sup>1</sup>
- Having grown up in Japan, in a culture where [sameness](#) and [commonality](#) are not only expected, but also given the highest value, I came to see at least one way that people respond to this kind cultural preference. In the 1960's many Japanese boys and girls wanted to *at least toy with* the freedom of *looking American*. The irony was that –*so often*– [their quest to be different took the same form](#). And they almost always ended up looking the [same](#) in their common desire to be [different!](#) Yet, we saw the same thing here in the US in the early '70's, when the *non-conformity* of so many people appeared in such a *uniform* way. This paradox, *and its inverse*, reminds me of one of my favorite movie quotes. A man says to a woman he recently met,

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"You're just *different*." She says, "Thank you. I know I'm *different*, but from now on I'm gonna try to be the *same*." He responds, "The *same* as what?" She answers, "*The same as people who aren't different!*"

- So, *quite aside from* our current tendency to treat the dialectic between *diversity* and *commonality* in a political way, the apparent tension between the two can remain unresolved for us, in personal *and* community life. This is especially true when we treat the two terms *as an either/or choice*. Yet, we *don't have to* decide *which* is more important, *difference* or *sameness*, in order to recognize the proper sphere in which each category is significant.
- For example, to the biologist as well as to the physician, *difference* is of interest precisely because of its apparent *divergence from expected sameness*. A sudden *change* in a patient's blood test results, especially as compared with *average* test results in the wider population, will get real attention.
- But to an early Christian missionary like Paul, *sameness* is of interest precisely because of its *divergence from expected differences between people* in the surrounding world. It may be true for us, as well. To a Roman citizen in the early decades of the first century, *and to Americans in 2019*, humanity can seem mostly characterized by *contrasts* ~ say, between men and women; between slaves and free; between Jews and Samaritans; between Roman citizens and others; between Westerners and Easterners; between Jews and gentiles; between African-Americans and European-Americans; and now, between Democrats and Republicans.
- Here we should be alert to *the way our culture shapes us*, especially as it may contrast with how the *writers of the New Testament aim to shape us*. This leads me to reflect on the influence of the culture in the early 1950's, when Grace Church moved here to the suburbs. That was a culture very

much in favor of 'sameness.' *In that era, and for some time after, inclusion of difference and diversity was clearly a challenge.* Yet, presently, the culture around us favors difference. And now, when we experience some pressure to privilege diversity, a regard for what we *share* and *have in common* *becomes more of a challenge.* So, how do we maintain the balance? Part of the answer lies in seeing these questions in *both-and* terms, rather than in a simple *either/or* way.

- Here, I find helpful an observation made by the Orthodox theologian, John Zizioulas.<sup>2</sup> We *all* have *a natural, biological aspect to our identity*. Each of us here also has *a supernatural, baptismal or church aspect to our identity*. So, *do we privilege one or the other of these two aspects of who we are?* Let's explore what it means to ask this. Though, as human beings, we have the same biophysical human-nature, there are absolutely *differentiating* characteristics between us. We have *unique* fingerprints; our DNA profile marks us as *different* from every other person; and new facial recognition technology depends upon *slight but importantly distinguishable* features that *set us all apart* from each other. All these things characterize the *natural biological aspect of our identity*.
- *At the same time, though* we all have *unique and different gifts and ministries*, as we heard Paul teach us last week, we yet have *the same baptismal church identity*. We are reminded of this every time we celebrate the rite of Baptism. Quoting Paul in Ephesians, we begin the liturgy by saying, "There is *one* Body and *one* Spirit; There is *one* hope in God's call to us; *One* Lord, *one* Faith, *one* Baptism; *One* God and Father of all." These phrases tell us that *the defining characteristic of the Church is our oneness in Christ, by the Holy Spirit*. We can treasure all the unique ways we *differ* from one another, and the blessings these *differences* may bring. But *with respect to our baptismal church identity, what we share in common has primacy*. We have all been given what Paul calls *lesser* gifts, such as

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prophecy, teaching, healing, leadership and tongues. But he urges us to strive for what he calls *the greater gifts*, which turn out to be **Faith, Hope and Charitable Love**, each of which is given by the Holy Spirit *for the common good*.

- And so, *with respect to natural created goods, differences and diversity* provide appreciable *delight*, and *enrichment*. But *with respect to supernatural gifts opened to us by Baptism, unity and commonality* best express *our oneness in Christ*.
- Let me close with this observation. **Light** is a biblical and frequent metaphor for the gift of God's presence, especially in John's Gospel. And the science of **light** has something to teach us about the Church. Painters know that with **pigments** in paint, white represents *the absence of color*, or the absence of difference. But with **light**, a *true white light represents the spectrum of all colors*. This is not because of the quality of any *single* color, but precisely because of the unity of **all** colors. When it comes to **light**, *if we see individual colors* we are only seeing **partial** aspects of the **whole!** This gives us insight about the Church. In order *to see the whole*, we must respect the presence of the parts. And in attending to the parts, we must also respect the unity and oneness that God seeks to form and nurture between us. The ark had the whole spectrum of animals within it. And our ark, the Church, holds and carries *all* of us!



Vivid Color Challenge Puzzle by Buffalo Games

(an evocative metaphor for the Church, based on 1 Corinthians)

**1 Corinthians 12:12-31a**

Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts.

**Luke 4:14-21**

Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,

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to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> See the Epistle reading, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a.

<sup>2</sup> See his book, *Being and Communion*.