

## **Sermon “Unity through Diversity”**

**Kirk of St James**

**Sunday January 21, 2023**

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One of my favourite things working in youth and camping ministry was watching young people grow into their identities. Over my seven years at Camp Geddie I got to know a lot of the young people who came to camp year after year. You also watched them change from one year to the next. They might come in as the most fearful camper one year and turn into the most enthusiastic the next. One year they might be sporty and the next they have a guitar in tow—all part of trying to figure out who they are. Unfortunately, you also saw some young people who used to be the most joyful coming in struggling with depression, or other difficult situations. Sometimes young people also came back with new names or ways of identifying. The one thing all of these situations had in common was that almost all came to camp because despite whatever they were dealing with in their personal life, they knew that camp was a safe place, a sanctuary where they could be themselves. At the end of every week, we closed with a talent show, and it was a blessing to see them perform, sing and share their talents and gifts with everyone else. We all need those places where we feel safe and loved for who we are.

Sociologist Reginald Bibby surveyed teenagers over a couple of decades and while many things changed one thing didn't and that was what was most important to young people—a sense of belonging. As adults I am not sure our answer would be much different. To be able to be our authentic self and know we are loved by people and in places that are

safe. A place that helps us feel grounded, even when other things around us make us feel like we are unraveling.

I chose the scriptures today based on the idea of identity, and community. Psalm 139 assures us that God knows us, God created us, and God loves us. Each of us are an integral part of the family of God, and we have a place—God does not make mistakes. It is also an affirmation of the unique and individual people that we are. We all have gifts, ideas, and experiences that shape who we are.

1 Corinthians takes this further as it is about being both our unique self and also part of the wider Christian community. As verse twenty-seven says “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” It is this idea of community and unity that I want to look at today.

Paul was not unique in comparing human community to the physical body. That description has been present in classical literature throughout history. What was unique was that Paul used it in a new way. Originally, when this comparison was used it was often to reinforce hierarchy. As one writer said “it suggested that the lowly workers, the drones, should obey and support their society, mercantile and political leaders. Those at the bottom of the social ladder should stay put and be grateful for the guidance and protection of your natural superiors.” Paul inverts this metaphor, as other liberation theologies do. Instead of keeping people in line and enforcing a rigid set of beliefs, Paul uses a rationale for diversity and interdependence.

“The inviting church is a tangible expression of the hospitality of God; people come in search of meaning in their lives, spiritual growth, deeper relationship with Christ,

opportunities to be of service in the world. They also come in search of authentic community, a place where they are known and accepted and where they can experience a sense of belonging. The challenge is to build a community (as Paul describes) where “there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.” Paul then stresses that we do this through diversity and not through conformity.

I had never thought about what Paul was presenting in this passage. Sometimes the communities we are part of may be grouped around a particular interest or, hobby. For example, playing sports might be a way we connect to others, or crafting, or music. Those are important because they are part of who we are and what brings us joy. Within the Christian church we are united by our faith, not by the uniformity of opinion and that we all believe the same things. We are all here because we are known, loved and called, and all of us are a part of the family of God.

If I were to ask each of you your views on faith and bible, and what that means we may have similar strands of thinking, but we will also have a lot of variances of opinion and that’s a good thing. As Paul stresses if we were only a bunch of eyeballs, or feet we would be rather grotesque. We need the diversity of our gifts and personalities to be the body of Christ. Whether we are a hand, an eye, a spine, or a funny bone, everyone is important.

A healthy community is not one that expects conformity of actions and opinions but one that invites and enables its members to find their own answer to the question “how can I be who I am and stay connected to you.” When we are in balance and when we function the way God calls us to, we find ourselves celebrating and sorrowing alongside each other. Paul affirms that we are both a unified body, and also unique and diverse parts that compose it. I

don't expect my children to be the same, to like the same things, do the same things, act the same way, and God does not expect that of us.

Today in our service we are acknowledging that churches have not always been a safe space for our LGBTQI siblings in Christ, for our first nations siblings in Christ, among others. In fact, for some people their interactions with the church have caused deep harm. Including the confession today is one way of saying "we see you; we are so sorry you have been caused pain by a place that should have been safe." We feel the sorrow of our siblings in Christ when they hurt. As the confession we read earlier stated "Only God can help us do this hard work of repairing, restoring, reconciling and healing." We pray that we continue to walk these paths together.

We are a community that shares our lives, the ups and the downs, good and bad. We are heads, and eyes, and hearts and funny bones, and elbows, and together we build something wildly beautiful. My prayer is that God continues to help us build a safe space for all, and through the power of the spirit that we might be a community that shares the love of God with everyone we meet, that here people know they are safe and welcome.