

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, JANUARY 26, 2020
“DEEP IN OUR HEARTS” (*1 Corinthians 1:10-18*)

Are you familiar with the Myers-Briggs personality indicator? Have you taken the test? Do you remember whether you are an introvert or extrovert, sensing / intuitive, thinking / feeling, judging / perceiving? When Warren and I were at Bloor Street United Church, we were part of a Myers-Briggs congregational workshop. Towards the end, we were invited to gather in groups according to our type, and discuss this situation: a friend in New York City has unexpectedly asked you to come. How do you respond? What do you do? My group of ISTJ's had absolutely no problem agreeing: first, we would explore the reasons behind the request. Did the friend require our help? If their need was strong, and urgent, we would make arrangements for someone to cover our work, family and volunteer responsibilities before booking our flight. This sounded very natural and logical to all of us. However, as we shared our answer, our polar opposites, the ENFP's just shook their heads in disbelief. The possibility of the friend needing help had never crossed their minds. They were too busy packing their bags, and planning all they would see and do while in the Big Apple. In that moment I recognized that it would be a lot simpler and easier if I only had to work with individuals who shared my personality type and preferably also my theology and values. But my life would also be much duller and poorer.

We need diversity. Jesus recognizes this as he gathers a community around him. True, in our gospel story today, all four are fishers based in the town of Capernaum. But Jesus goes on to add a tax collector - the natural enemy of fishers as he is the one in the employ of the hated Romans who waits on the

dock to exact a toll on all their catch - a zealot who supports the violent overthrow of the occupational forces plus some women like Mary Magdalene. On the surface, these individuals have nothing in common. From the gospel accounts we know that they are not always of one heart and mind: they argue over who is the greatest; they vie for the seats of honour in God's kingdom; they all do not come to an awareness of who Jesus really is at the same moment. And yet, they are drawn together by their love of Jesus and their desire to follow in his way, joining in God's mission and ministry in the world.

On the surface, the fifty or so people in the church in Corinth have nothing in common: some like Paul are Jews / others are Gentiles, probably God-fearers who attached themselves to the synagogue without taking the formal step of converting; some are wealthy, able to bring lots of good food to their gatherings / others can contribute very little; some are free / others are slaves at the beck and call of their masters; some of the members are women like Chloe / others are men. In itself, this diversity is a blessing, adding to the richness of their life together. However, this diversity has given rise to factions and quarrelling.

The names of the leaders - Apollos and Cephas - may not be familiar, but I would argue, the behaviour is. Look at how the church has split again and again down through the ages. As the number of Christians grew during the first and second centuries so did the divisions as some stressed the divinity of Jesus and others his humanity; as different interpretations of the Trinity developed and ideas around proper worship practices. Then in 1054, there was the Great Schism that split the church into Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic. Even

when leaders were more intent on reform than on starting their own church, the upshot was often the same. With Martin Luther, the Roman Catholic Church was torn apart and Protestantism was born. With John Wesley, the Anglican Church was sundered and Methodists came into being.

Within denominations, factions and quarrelling can break out as those of us who lived through “The Issue” can attest. After the 1988 decision, a few congregations chose to follow their minister out of the United Church to underline their opposition to the acceptance of gays and lesbians as ministers. Some formed a network of churches espousing more traditional values. Others began the journey towards becoming Affirming congregations, openly and gladly welcoming LGBTQ+ individuals. The Community of Concern and Affirm United could and did both claim a place within the United Church since, as has often been observed, this denomination is more like a big tent in which there is room for a broad spectrum of theology. Problems really only arose when individuals decided that their group had a corner on “the truth”. They were right; everyone else was wrong. Therefore they had no reason to listen to anyone else and every justification to fight to win. That’s when respectful dialogue and discussion went out the window, and personal attacks, and ugliness took over.

Thankfully, those days are passed, but the behaviour can still appear. Small groups in congregations are wonderful They can give us that precious sense of belonging. They can offer us opportunities to extend and receive support. They become problematic, however, when we assume our group has

the right values and focus, **the** correct attitude and approach. Others are wrong. They need to be defeated. They must adopt our ideas, and adhere to our rules.

Along comes Paul with the reminder that such quarrelling does not belong within the Christian community. What unites us as human beings, as strands woven into God's giant web of creation, is far more significant than the superficial differences that divide us. When I lived in Israel, my parents and I drove South along the coast to see a Bedouin camel market. It was just as colourful and exotic as I had hoped. Picture camels in all sizes and shades of tan and brown being led by men wearing turbans and long flowing robes. Picture veiled women hawking their wares along dusty narrow streets. In our sundresses and Tilley hats, my Mom and I couldn't have looked more out of place. A woman, one of the sellers, beckoned to my Mom. She lifted the edge of her veil to reveal a lock of grey hair. She pointed to my Mom's grey hair and then to her own. No words were spoken, but her smile said it all: you and I are both mothers and grandmothers. We have seen a lot and have wisdom to impart. In that moment, the differences in language and culture, in faith tradition and life style didn't matter at all. "Deep in our hearts, there is a common story, telling creation that we are one."

What if we were to focus on what unites us rather than what divides us? What might happen? You may have heard a story on CBC Radio about David Weismann, a Twitter troll, and Sarah Silverman, a liberal and a comedian. David perceived his engagement online as social media war. His mission was to take on anyone who didn't support Donald Trump, and hammer them with what he

believed were the only true facts. He launched one of his attacks against Sarah. Instead of blocking him or lashing out, Sarah responded without judging him or telling him he was wrong. As David observed: “we started talking and its was civil. There was no name-calling, no insults. And I kind of realized, ‘Woah. I’m not used to that.’ That kind of softened my heart ... to actually have a discussion instead of arguing all the time.” David realized: liberals were not his enemies. They were just people with different values.

What if we were to focus on what unites us rather than what divides us. What if we were to remember as Paul reminds the Corinthians that we are all members of the one body of Christ? What might happen? Well, at Bloor Street, the Renewal Committee, which was wall to wall ENFP’s - an ideal personality type for a group who were expected to dream, discuss and come up with outside the box plans - accepted me with my penchant for stepping back and analyzing and my strong need to reach conclusion, and I learned to appreciate their gifts. We realized that “deep in our hearts, there is a common vision.” At Richmond Hill United Church, the Council with the help of a facilitator discovered that some of its members were critics who tend to see what is wrong with a plan; some were realists who have a firm understanding of budgets, volunteer support available and the ministry context; some were dreamers who are more aware of possibilities than problems, always seeing ways the congregation, the community, the world can grow into what God intended. Critics weren’t out to annoy realists. Realists weren’t bent on making the lives of dreamers miserable.

God's Spirit was at work in all. It simply manifested itself differently. We realized that "deep in our hearts, there is a common song."

What if here at Sharon-Hope United Church, we were to focus on what unites us rather than what divides us. What might happen?