

27 January 2019

1 Corinthians 12.12-31a

Dealing with difference

We are inveterate sorters, classifiers.

It's how we bring order into our very complex world.

I have a number of books at home. So that I know where to find the book I want, they are in a certain order on my bookshelves. I have classified them and sorted them.

And we will do it with all sorts of things at home, just so that our lives are not totally chaotic.

Our clothes will be in some sort of order. Our kitchen cupboards will probably keep similar things together. Some of us will have our own systems that only have meaning for us – no one else will be able to work out the logic.

Some of us are much more fastidious in doing this than others – not enough to keep all your shirts together, but then you have to separate short-sleeved from long-sleeved, casual from smart, and then according to colour.

And, of course, it depends upon how many you have as to how careful you have to be. The greater the variety, the more need there is to classify and to sort.

It's how we can make sense of living in a diverse world.

But the other thing that we do is that we grade things and create hierarchies. When things are different from each other, we don't just want to work out what makes one thing different to something else, we also want to somehow compare those two things. Is one better than the other? Do I like one better than the other?

What is your favourite?

We make value-judgments on things all of the time – whether consciously or unconsciously.

Now, given all of this, is it any wonder that we end up going through similar processes when we find ourselves confronted with a wide diversity of people in our lives.

In order to make sense of it all we classify people – age, gender, what they dress like/look like, ethnicity, skin-colour, personality, language ...

In itself, there is nothing wrong with this. It is how we identify and remember individuals

But alongside this we do our thing of ‘comparing’ and ‘grading’ as well

- Where does this person sit on the ‘attractiveness’ spectrum?
- Where does this person sit on the ‘intelligence’ spectrum?
- Where does this person sit on the ‘wealth’ spectrum?
- Where does this person sit on the ‘likeability’ spectrum?
- Where does this person sit on the ‘worth-knowing’ spectrum?

Our classifying is loaded with a whole number of value-judgments.

In itself this doesn’t have to be a bad thing – it’s all to do with the kind of value-judgments that we are making as we do this job of comparing and grading.

And even this grading thing that we do isn’t necessarily a bad thing.

It’s a good thing that we do a quick assessment of the likely integrity of the stranger who calls us on the phone out of the blue suggesting that they could give us a much better deal on our pension if only we transferred our pension pot into their company.

It’s a good thing if we can assess that the person that we are talking to may be on the autistic spectrum, if that means that we are able to communicate with them more effectively and relate to them more sensitively – it’s not a bad thing that we have discerned that this is a person with different abilities.

But those value-judgments are highly charged.

Sometimes those value-judgments can be very affirming, or they can be very dismissive.

And the greatest danger that confronts us is that we end up grading some people as of more inherent worth than others.

Paul addresses the challenge of living in a diverse community in 1 Corinthians 12. This was a community where their diversity had become a problem and a challenge to them.

It is clear that the church in Corinth reflects the society in which it lives in terms of its diversity. Corinth was a city that had been rebuilt by the Romans and repopulated with people from all over the Roman empire. It was a cosmopolitan city. It was a city with people from a plethora of religious and philosophical beliefs. And of course, it was a highly stratified society from slaves to artisans, to traders to the wealthy elite. And it is likely that people from all strata and all backgrounds were part of the Corinthian church.

Paul reminds these Christians that one of the things that singles out the Christian church is the way in which their Christian faith had broken down barriers which at one time would have been all-important for them.

“we were all baptised by the one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”

He is taking them back to the roots of their Christian faith and to the foundational principles of the early Christian church.

Whatever their social background – whether slave or free – and whatever their ethnic background – whether Greek or Jew – their experience of the life of faith through the Spirit of God at work in their lives was one and the same.

Without exception they all knew the Spirit of Christ welling up within them, enabling them to cry out to God, “Abba, Father”. They were all now, every single one of them, sons and daughters of God.

And the early Christian church was an experiment in working out what that meant in practice.

But here in Corinth, new divisions had begun to appear. They might have begun to put behind them some of these old divisions, but they had begun to create some new ones. And the new divisions that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 12 were all about the different gifts that people had been given by the Spirit of God to enable them to play their part in the community of faith.

What seems to have happened is that some members of the church had really gone to town in a most unhelpful way in comparing and grading these different

gifts. Paul explains what has gone wrong through using the analogy of the human body to describe our life in community as a church.

He says,

‘Let’s think of all of the members of the church like the different parts of a body.

All of the parts are extraordinarily different –

- hands, feet
- eyes and ears
- mouth and nose
- heart and stomach
- intestines and liver
- brain and spleen

you couldn’t get much more diversity than that.

- they don’t look very much alike
- they don’t work in the same way
- they don’t perform the same function

And yet together they form this remarkable unit of the human body, that is able to think and move, to act, to enter into relationships’

This is a daring image that both emphasises the diversity of the community of the church *and* emphasises its intended unity.

Given the circumstances, you might have expected Paul to turn to some sort of analogy that emphasises the fact that fundamentally we are all essentially the same – that *underplays* our diversity ... but actually he does quite the opposite.

And in a rare piece of humour in Paul’s letters, Paul conjures up a cartoon picture of different parts of the body speaking to each other.

And Paul has recognised that what has gone wrong here is the misuse of this grading and comparing thing that we do to deal with the diversity of the world.

And it has two major impacts:

The first impact is that people end up coming to the conclusion that **“I don’t belong.”**

What has happened is that this comparing and grading between the different gifts has ended up valuing some gifts as more important than others ... but has then gone to the next step of deciding that those people with these gifts are more important than those with other gifts.

But, of course, this has left some people looking at themselves and feeling inferior to others.

So Paul has the foot talking to the hand:

"If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body."

Here is somebody in Paul’s world seeing the gifts of other people and seeing how much they are able to contribute to the whole, yet failing to see how their own very different gifts can make any kind of difference.

In a world that is graded and comparisons made, we become acutely aware of how we differ from others and so can end up feeling inferior. Everyone else feels that they fit in so much better than we do.

Institutions sometimes give unconscious signals that some people don't really belong. If people hear the message long enough that they are worthless and don't belong - if that is what is modelled in the community and if that is what is signalled - people begin to believe it and act on it. Paul is wanting to give a very different message.

Paul's solution using the body metaphor:

The body is worse off if we do not all play our part and contribute.

Everyone has their different part to play in the whole.

This has to do with valuing one another, but within that also valuing who God has made us to be.

Before challenging those who think too highly of themselves, Paul encourages those who have been made to feel inferior in the

And of course, the second impact is the attitude, **“You don’t belong!”**

Paul recognises the danger that in creating this hierarchy of gifts in which some are so much more important than others, we can end up not only writing off the gifts of others, but also writing off other people.

Again he uses this cartoon-like image of parts of the body speaking to each other

"The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!""

The others are different from me, so I don't need them. Their gifts are less important than mine, and I can certainly get on without them.

You can see how this grading and comparing that we do all of the time has gone disastrously wrong here. It has led to this unhealthy sense of superiority and inferiority. The closed attitude, "I don't need you," very quickly leads to the dismissive attitude of "you don't really belong here."

The particular circumstances are not that important. In Corinth this happens to have arisen over the question of gifts of the Spirit. But this dynamic can take hold in communities based on any almost any pretext ... because this is a perpetual challenge for us as humans being living in community with the extraordinary diversity that characterises our life in this world.

Superiority over the other, leads to fear of the other and hatred of the other.

This is the attitude that has led to the holocaust and to genocide. It leads to racism and sexism. It leads to the marginalisation of minorities and the exclusion of the different.

Paul's solution using the body metaphor:

Because we are different, we need each other.

The parts of the body that are 'unpresentable' we treat with special modesty.

Honouring the less honourable ...

Giving equal concern for one another.

"If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it."

We are each impoverished if we seek to go it alone, if we refuse community and cooperation with others.

Everybody in the end is diminished.