

Joe's Timely Wisdom

Text: I Corinthians 12: 4-11, 31; I Corinthians 13: 1-7; 13

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Six of us were sitting around a table in the church vestry. It was a no-frills kind of space; and cold, too, it being February in Vermont. Still, there was a certain measure of warmth beneath our conversation under the guise of proper New England reticence.

Joe was the Chairman of the Board of Trustees. He got us right to work on the matter at hand which was to review bids on restoring our historic steeple - which had been the skyline of the Village of Newfane for more than 300 years.

As always with steeples in New England, the cost of upkeep was then and still is outrageously high. So money, or the lack of it, quickly turned up the gas on our discussion. Strange how money does that in the church.

Everyone had an opinion on what we should do. Seemed like there were two-dozen opinions among the six of us. Of course, the simplest solution was to have it repainted. But then less colonial words like siding, and aluminum, and vinyl crept in.

Insistence flared as our deliberations fanned into a Green Mountain bon-fire. We got long on talking and short on listening. The volume picked up a good bit. And, predictably, everyone was staking his perspective as the right one.

I was a young parson at the time just learning my way. So I naively said, "I just wish we could all remember that this is the church we are arguing about. It would please me if we could all come to common and reasonable ground about this."

It was just then that crusty ole Joe took the center. "Now Reverend," he responded. (That's how he addressed me when he was intending to reel me in.) "If we all thought like you around here it would take only one of us to manage the church."

All eyes turned Joe's way as he landed me. "You may be the pastor, fair enough, but if it only takes one of us around here to run things I know who I'd choose. And it hurts me awful to think that I would have to leave you out!"

Generally speaking, Joe was not a deep well of wisdom. But this time he was absolutely spot-on. Striving to think alike is not at all the best practice for the church in any setting to aspire to. And that's what he thought I was suggesting.

I suspect that this is precisely why Paul, cleverly persuasive as he was, provided a metaphor to lift up the organic nature of the church. Apparently, the early community in Corinth must have displayed the same propensity that our meeting suggested.

We actually spoke some of his words in call to worship today, and our scripture readings spell it out in full array. He presented the church as the body of Christ, which relies on the diversity and not the sameness of members to each do their part.

Maybe it was a visual culture then, too. Feet and arms and ears and minds! Picturesque and clear! But still, they were a dissonant lot. The heart thought herself better than the lesser hand; and the strong elbow thought himself best of all.

Somewhat more scolding Katherine Jefferts Schori¹, once presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church: "What we don't need in the church are passive consumers of ministry. We need people who know how to give their love and passion for God away."

She went on, "We sure don't need prima donnas who need to be at the center of ecclesiastical attention either. Last time I checked the Body of Christ already has a head, and it's not you or me or the rector down the street." O my goodness!

Most positively, another Paul of Beatles fame said: "I love to hear a choir. I love to see the faces of real people devoting themselves to a piece of music. I like the teamwork. It makes me feel optimistic about the human race when I see cooperation like that."

Let me reel it in as Joe did to me. Today we will be voting on our church budget for this current year. I so deeply appreciate all of commitment that it represents. It has been said that a church budget is a statement of faith for a congregation.

That's true. It's also true that I have excellent hearing! And I've heard the grumble that our pledge base is too low and our endowment draw is too high. (Of course, we could all choose to resolve that tension right now - but oddly and curious, we don't.)

And over the years, I have heard things like: "I'll give to the music." "I don't like the blue ceiling." "I think the staff is too large." "We don't spend enough on mission." "We should move to a smaller building."

Ye gads! Was Paul writing to the Corinthians or to us? And to be fair, his words at center today were not principally about money. They were about the broader invitation to be disciples and how we contribute ourselves to the mystery of the church.

These present days we are in the thick of the nominating process asking people to serve in some capacity within the church. And truly, for us as for virtually all volunteer driven organizations in the land, it has become the hardest job going. Hands. Down. Hard.

Martin Copenhaver² muses that Jesus probably did everything he could to avoid the nominating committee. "Remember?" he opines, "Jesus was an introvert! His ministry was characterized by intense engagement with individuals in rhythm with time, alone, or in the circle a few close friends."

By contrast, he says, "Paul was a garrulous extrovert. The only time he seemed alone was when he was in prison. And even then he was trying to convert the person in the next cell with the incessancy of an extrovert."

Martin concludes, "The pairing of Jesus and Paul here is important for us. It reminds us that it takes all kinds and sorts to make the church work and even apparent extremes can collaborate fruitfully. It might even be said that we actually need each other."

Back to Ole' Joe. Remember? He made an unexpectedly eloquent closing comment to our Trustees meeting. "Now Reverend. I hope I have not offended you. Even though we do not always agree, we all love the church. I think that's what matters most."

"But how about if from now on I'll let you know when we need your guidance at a meeting. I'm sure the time spent at home with your lovely wife would be a welcome change from too many evenings down here at the church."

And then, get this. This is big. Joe got up and walked toward me. He opened wide his arms. And then hugged me. Ole Crusty Joe! I swear to it! And he was purring when he wrapped his arms around me. And then he said he loved me, too.

I tell you: It never ceases to amaze me how God works in such mysterious and unexpected ways! What a very good thing! Amen.

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¹ Katherine Jefferts Schori. [A Wing and a Prayer](#). Morehouse Publishing, 2007, p. 23.

² Martin Copenhaver. [The Gospel in Miniature](#). Turner Publishing, 2018, pp. 113-114.