

# BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

---

January 20, 2019

Epiphany 2

[1 Corinthians 12:4-11](#)

[John 2:1-10](#)

---

(prayer)

You may know that I have a quirky sense of humour. Primarily, I love plays on words and the art of sarcasm. And... I am quite keen to quote a line from a TV show or a movie out of context. In fact, most of the conversations I have with my wife were originally created by Hollywood screenwriters. “Inconceivable?” No, quite true.

I am horrible (or wonderful, depending on your perspective) to sit beside at a meeting, because I am very likely to learn over to share a funny thought that just popped into my head... far too often: barely related to the discussion at hand, and certainly not helpful to purpose of the event overall.

When something makes myself giggle, I like to share my joy. But as an introvert, I pick on the closest person.

//

//

Given all that, it should not be *that* surprising to hear that I am a bit of a fan of Jim Carrey.

Like the rest of the world, I first noticed him on the TV sketch comedy show, [In Living Color](#), but it was the slapstick, physical comedy mixed with bathroom humour of the Ace Ventura movies that made him a household name. *Alrighty then!*

//

Currently, Carrey is getting noticed again for his TV show (on The Movie Network), [Kidding](#), and his propensity for creating politically charged portraits.

//

I am actually having trouble thinking of a Jim Carrey movie that I haven't enjoyed... at some level - truth be told, you have to go to a pretty low level to enjoy some of them.

I do like the straight up comedies: Cable Guy, Bruce Almighty, Dumb and Dumber (a quarter of my vocabulary comes from Dumb and Dumber; the other three quarters are The Princess Bride, Monty Python and Broadway Show Tunes).

//

But Jim Carrey is more than a silly comedian. Some of my personal favorite Jim Carrey movies are the lesser known, not as *funny*, “[Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind](#)” and “[The Number 23](#)”.

//

I will say that I imagine many people might agree that one of the best comedy-drama movies starring Jim Carrey is [The Truman Show](#).

//

//

The premise of The Truman Show is that Truman Burbank has (unknowingly) lived his entire life in a 24 hour Hollywood soundstage. Everything in his world is a prop in a TV reality show. Everyone around him (strangers and friends alike) are actors.

The existential question the movie invites is: “What is Real?” - as Freddie Mercury wondered *Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy?*

//

The Truman Show allows us watch Jim Carrey’s character’s literal *journey of self-discovery* as he explores the age-old questions: Am I just like everyone else? Is there more to my life that what appears obvious? How do I fit in?

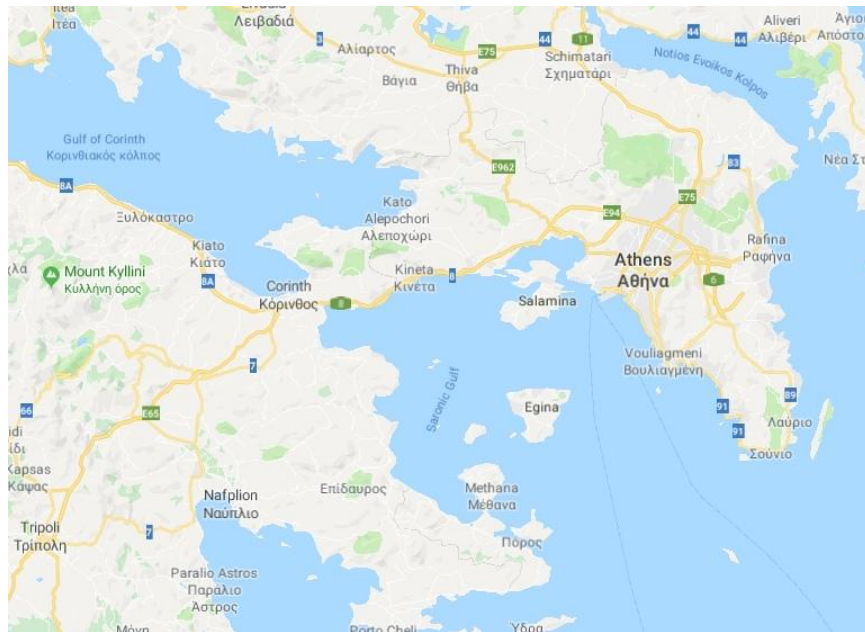
//

//

//

The Corinthian Christians were a diverse group. This makes sense given the geography of where Corinth is. When you look at a map of Greece, you see that the nation is basically a peninsula jutting out into the Mediterranean Sea. At the south end, the land narrows quite significantly before finally expanding westward a bit more. The modern and ancient city of Corinth is located right at that narrow strip of land connecting the other parts of Greece to the east and west. On the north side: the Gulf of Corinth; on the south: the Saronic Gulf - both of which eventually access the Mediterranean.

Corinth (of the first century) was a cosmopolitan city because it was at the crossroads of land and sea transport. Corinth was on a strip of land where the travelers of the world gathered.



//

//

If you arrived in Corinth and expected to find a homogenous group of like-minded people, you would be in for a surprise.

//

As I said, the Corinthian Christians were a diverse community. And with diversity, comes the potential for misunderstanding and even conflict.

Much of Paul's letter that we call *First Corinthians* is dedicated to trying to bridge divisions within the Corinthian Christian Community.

I say **we** call it "first corinthians" because it was not the first letter shared between Paul and this church. In 1st Corinthians, chapter 5, Paul makes reference to an 'earlier letter.

Paul gets right to the point in the first chapter: "*It has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided?*" (1Cor1:11-13)

It was not just leadership where the divisions created problems: they even disagreed about how the Corinthians were practicing The Lord's Supper - sharing communion: "*When you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you.*" (1Cor11:18)

//

I suspect that there were those in the Corinthian church that expected Paul to precise over a sort of final offer arbitration.

They had appealed to Paul and seemed prepared to invite him to step in and resolve their disputes. *Tell us who is right.*

That is a very legalistic and formal attempt to resolve the dispute. It is usually the process of last resort when it comes to conflict resolution.

//

The last lingering part of my work as the recording secretary of the United Church's Yellowhead Presbytery (which was technically over on December 31st) is that I am waiting to hear the results of an appeal of a decision the presbytery made last March. When the decision is released (any day now), it will not try and find a middle ground or compromise... we will learn whether the decision can stand or not. When conflict gets to that point, it comes down to us or them - all or nothing.

//

The Apostle began the letter, writing: "*All of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you; you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose.*" (1Cor1:10)

Paul had listened to the different sides. He agreed that they should be united. As they read the letter, they might have expected Paul to issue a ruling. Which side would win the day?

The obvious expectation might have been that one side would be forced to give in to the other.

Unity by capitulation.

Unity through dictated sameness.

//

//

But Paul doesn't go there.

//

Although, within 1st Corinthians there are specific issues addressed and Paul offers his take on what theology should be lived out on topics, the heart of the letter provides the church with a teaching

*Rev. T. Blaine Gregg*

on an general attitude that could be an overarching context to avoiding future divisions in the church. Paul calls it “*a still more excellent way.*” (1Cor12:31).

The core of the corinthian correspondence are chapters twelve and thirteen. They are some of the most well-known verses in all of Paul's writings. These chapters are rich in metaphor, and deep in meaning.

The lectionary suggests that we take three weeks to engage this teaching.

//

Today, we focus on the first part of chapter twelve. “*There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit ... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*” (1Cor12:4,7)

Paul goes on to list a few examples of the variety of ways people serve the common good:

- wisdom,
- knowledge,
- healing
- miracle working,
- prophecy,
- discernment, mystical speaking,
- interpretation

“*All these are activated by one and the same Spirit.*” (1Cor12:11)

The first division that Paul describes in the letter is how people are lining up behind a variety of leaders - each of whom inspires people in different ways.

In chapter twelve, Paul seems to be saying that the church can use the variety in its bigger mission.

//

I once heard a theologian talk about how modern christians sometimes like to criticize other christians for doing things differently. He would say “if it *works* for you, God bless you.”

It is a fact of church life that when something feels good and right for us, that we are prone to project that on to others. If it works for me, it should work for you.

Of course, this is most obvious when we look at the theologies and practices of different Christian denominations. When I lead confirmation classes, I like to start by going through a condensed version of church history to try and explain how the Christianity went from *a dozen people following Jesus around* to *tens of thousands of [distinct denominations](#)* - some of whom don't get along very well; and some of whom are pretty sure that others on the list don't really qualify as Christian.

But it is not just inter-denominationally that we see this dynamic at play. Within even the most dogmatic denomination, theological and practical divisions, exist. The presbytery appeal that I mentioned earlier is a prime example of different parts of the UCCan disagreeing on how church should be done and what should fit into what is acceptable.

And of course, even within a single congregation. Anyone who has ever had the responsibility of picking hymns for church services know that this is not true.

And, Council members? At our meeting, last Wednesday, did everyone agree on everything?

//

Disagreements and diversity within the church are not the issues; they are facts of our existence.

The challenge is... do we let our differences divide us? Or is the spirit stronger than our divisions?

//

In 1st Corinthians, Paul is saying to both the first and twenty-first century christians: *You - with your particular gifts, with the way you serve, with the things you do - have a valued place in the church. You do not have to be the same as the person beside you to be united. The loving Spirit of God is your common ground. [Christ is our unity.](#)*

How does Paul want the church deal with divisions? By requiring sameness? No, by respecting the goodness that comes from variety.

//

Even Paul would admit that there are limits to how compatible variety might be within a given community. But he does profess that a unity of spirit (having the same mind and purpose) does not require everyone serving in the same way.

We can do more within an atmosphere of diversity rather than sameness.

Next week, we will read (perhaps) Paul's (most well known) parable to drive this point home.

//

Unity is very different from uniformity.

//

In two weeks, St. David's United Church will hold its annual General meeting. Next week, everyone will be able to read through a report on the church of 2018.

- You will see and hear variety.

*Rev. T. Blaine Gregg*

- You might even see and hear a competing idea or priority or two.
- And... you will see and hear a uniting Spirit of God urging us toward a common good:  
*welcoming in and reaching out!*

//

//

It is good for the church to stretch its wings and stretch the envelopes of what might seem easy or obvious.

How else does water ever become wine?

//

//

The church can exist in varied schemes and still serve a common good.

//

And if we can do that for ourselves, imagine what good we can offer the world by our example.

//

Good morning.

And in case I don't see you:

good afternoon,

good evening,

and good night.

//

Let us pray:

God of All, help us hear and see you when you create, work, teach, and heal in new places. Ready our hearts to welcome you among us. Amen.

#822VU "All People That On Earth Do Dwell"