

Year C, January 27, 2019
3 Epiphany
Christ Church, Mexia

There were many divisions in the church at Corinth in the first century – divisions between the more conservative Jewish Christians and the more liberal Greek Christians, between the politically enslaved and the politically free, between those who emphasized speaking in tongues and those who emphasized speaking boldly about Christ, between the people who were loyal to Paul, the founder, or Peter or Apollos who came after Paul. These divisions were what Paul was trying to address in the reading from 1 Corinthians today.

In a way, the church had become like a flock of seagulls. As Philip Yancey observed, "It's easy to see why people like the seagull. I've sat overlooking a craggy harbor and watched one. He exults in freedom. He thrusts his wings backward with powerful strokes, climbing higher, higher until he's above all the other gulls, then coasts downward in majestic loops and circles. He constantly performs, as if he knows a movie camera is trained on him, recording."

But those of us who have spent any time observing seagulls know there is another side – there's more than beauty. Yancey continues: "In a flock, though, the seagull is a different bird. His majesty and dignity melt into a sordid slough of in-fighting and cruelty. Watch that same gull as he dive-bombs into a group of gulls, provoking a flurry of scattered feathers and angry squawks, to steal a tiny morsel of meat. The concepts of sharing and manners do not exist among seagulls. They are so fiercely competitive and jealous that if you tie a red ribbon around the leg of one gull, making him stand out, you sentence him to execution. The others in his flock will furiously attack him with claws and beaks, hammering through feathers and flesh to draw blood. They will continue until he lies flattened in a bloody heap."

Not a pretty picture, is it? Sad, but true. And many churches have been forced to their demise when members acted like seagulls. It was that way in the first century, and it is that way today, in some places. Most Americans value freedom and independence, the chance to rise to the top and reap the rewards that come with that accomplishment. So, we have a tendency to view others as competitors. And it is easy to become jealous when others seem to have more, seem to be doing better, or seem to be getting the attention that we desire, even in the church.

That's why Yancey suggests that we adopt a model of geese for our group efforts, the ideal behavioral model for our church and our society, in lieu of that of seagulls. Geese fly in a "V" shaped formation, and scientific tests reveal that they can fly 60-70 percent faster and farther by doing so than they can on their own. The goose out front has the most difficult job; not only does he/she have to know which way to go, he/she suffers more wind resistance and gets tired more quickly, which is why the leadership changes so often, creating seeming chaos at the point of the V. But this allows them to continue flying without stopping for rest. The leader drops back, and another goose takes his/her place at the front.

The easiest flight is experienced toward the rear, and the stronger geese permit the weak, the younger or older birds to fly there. It is even believed that the "honking" that we often hear is the encouragement given by the stronger birds to those less fortunate. Furthermore, if a goose becomes too tired or ill and has to "drop out" of the formation, he/she is never abandoned. A healthy one will follow the ailing one to the ground and wait until the journey can be taken up again. This type of cooperation within the social order contributes to the survival and well-being of the flock. Now that isn't to say that geese are perfect and without fault – do not have their moments. Generally, they are better by comparison.

And mostly for us, it concerns accepting the differences that exist among us and realizing that it is OK that we are different – in fact, it is wonderful that we are different, that we each bring our unique contribution and we all gain from that, whatever it may be. It certainly does not come from emphasizing the differences, or from attacking those who are different, like the gulls.

God has blessed each of us differently, because like our bodies, the church needs a variety of gifts to ensure survival and to accomplish its mission. Did you know - the human body is a marvelous thing and unbelievably complex with around 60 million cells, 36 million heartbeats every year, 300 billion red cells produced every day, and 60,000 miles of blood vessels in each one. I doubt that our minds appreciate or understand the complexity of our human bodies. And I am quite sure that we cannot comprehend the complexity of the body of Christ – the church, what the church is and what the church should be.

Division isn't just a phenomenon of Paul's day. When Jesus preached in Nazareth, his hometown, they wanted to throw him off a cliff because they didn't like what he said. Sadly, our politicians/elected officials tend to act more like gulls than geese for the most part. Some of our churches do the same today. Fortunately, this church community is not like that. I pray that we may continue to have the wisdom and the love to accept those who are different, or with whom we disagree. To live the gospel, love for all must be our goal, our primary purpose in life, just as God loves each of us, different as we are.

Dear God, allow us to continue to be more like geese than seagulls.

In the name of the One God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.
Amen.