

One of my favorite meals is what I call the “Big Salad.” This is my “go-to” dinner when Don is out playing with the band.

I use what could be called a mixing bowl. I fill it with romaine lettuce (mostly the heart – thank goodness Don likes the dark greens on the outside!), tomatoes, shredded carrot, chopped kalamata olives (green and black), radicchio, sunflower seeds, a sprinkle of feta cheese, some cut up chicken and, when I’m feeling like I deserve an extra treat – I add dried cranberries. Then I top the whole thing with just enough Paul Newman’s lite balsamic vinaigrette to wet things down a little, grab a fork and some little whole wheat crackers and dive in.

I like to toss it all together and coat the leaves with the dressing, which is why I need the big bowl. And though all the ingredients come together in my Big Salad, when I eat it, I can still make out each one, because they’re so unique and they haven’t been blended. And when I’m finished with it, I’m full and I feel almost righteous, because it is a healthy meal and good for me.

Well, this may be too much information for some of you, but I really do have a reason for telling you about my salad...and if I’m doing my job here, when I finish, you will feel full and a little righteous too.

The section of Scripture we heard today comes from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians – remember them? This is the group of people who live in a bustling port city full of all kinds of unusual people from cultures all over the known world. There are at least 12 temples dedicated to other gods, including Apollo and Aphrodite, the goddess of love. There are new rich and old poor, each finding a spot in the new religion Paul has brought to them, and because of the incredible commerce and many belief systems that have found their way to Corinth, the people of his new church are a little - shall we say – rowdy and rough around the edges.

Every time I read about the town of Corinth I’m reminded of Las Vegas – it has lots of opportunities for you to do things you wouldn’t want to tell your mother about. Corinth and its new church was vital to the growth of the movement, but it’s clear that they exasperated Paul on more than one occasion...here’s one instance.

In our Scripture for today, Paul speaks of the many diverse gifts this astounding cluster of people could bring to the new church – but if you were to read the chapter just before, you would find that Paul had soundly scolded them for disrespecting the intent of the Lord’s Supper! Apparently, the Lord’s Supper took place after a worship experience - a group of new Christians would bring food and wine to share as a communal meal as they would recall how Jesus shared his body and blood with his friends.

However, in Corinth, it took on a new twist, and they did it their own way. Food and wine was brought for the meal, all right - wealthier members brought more and better food, ate it themselves and didn’t share with the poorer members who probably brought little or none – so some went home hungry because they weren’t fed. There might have been some name-calling, due to the oversight, and apparently quite a few of them got inebriated on all the wine that was available, and they had to be carried home afterwards...it seems the Corinthians didn’t get it.

This most certainly wasn’t what Jesus had in mind when he said, “Think of me when you eat and drink,” and Paul spent much of Chapter 12 scolding the good people of Corinth for their misbehavior

and wanton ways! Recent research has discovered that there were social customs for seating at parties in private homes that allowed for the separation between the rich and the poor, (and since there wasn't a church building to meet in, the people were forced to meet in homes, which encouraged a pecking order of sorts for serving food and beverage). However, if the people were following Jesus' example as they'd been taught, all guests should have received the same amounts and be treated equally. But it didn't happen that way, and this was actually Paul's primary cause for the scolding.

He was wise to realize that in spite of their coarseness, each member brought his or her own unique contribution to the church. The very element that challenged Paul and probably frustrated him was what made the new Christians of Corinth worth working with and coaching along. The list is really wonderful and demonstrates that the people of Corinth weren't useless or worthless – they had value and could contribute to the overall success of the new church – if they made a few modifications.

Listen to how Eugene Peterson's "The Message" describes this section of our Scripture...

***God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God himself is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful:***

***wise counsel - clear understanding - simple trust - healing the sick - miraculous acts – proclamation - distinguishing between spirits –tongues (speaking eloquently) - interpretation of tongues.***

***All these gifts have a common origin, but are handed out one by one by the one Spirit of God. He decides who gets what, and when.***

The little church at Corinth was like a tossed salad...many parts, all pieces of the new church and all unique...all brought together by the Spirit in a giant bowl...creating a whole body for God's satisfying work. Paul recognized that what the people of Corinth may have lacked in the "reverential spiritual department" they fully made up for in the variety of how they contributed to the good work.

I'd say that here, intentions counted for quite a bit...and Paul in his wisdom...looked the other way when things didn't quite go as he thought they would. He kept writing letters – he kept turning their focus around to what he wanted them to understand and do. And, I have a feeling they became a cornerstone of the new church based on God's love through Jesus Christ.

In our time, in our country, our lives aren't much different than they were for others so long ago in Corinth. We're full of good intentions, too, but we're often crazy-busy, and we become preoccupied with our own schedules and activities – God isn't always at the center of our lives.

We have our own temptations - not only for obvious things like being able to choose from plenty of food and wine and participate in the pleasures of the flesh, but also for less tangible things like striving for fame and recognition, or seeking success and financial security – focusing on what's good for us and forgetting about the rest of the world. We don't intend to be this way – it just happens.

A horrible event like the earthquake in Haiti can really force everyone to look at just how fortunate many of us are – and force us to wonder at how others with so little have been living, especially now that it's all gone. As in the time of Paul, there still is a broad space between those who “have” and those who “have not.”

While many of us share freely and regularly with our less fortunate neighbors, (and the news informs us that donations for Haiti are amazingly high for these economic times), the question needs to be asked: how is it that there are so many discrepancies between us? How is it that in some nations, many can afford to purchase one or two homes to live in, but so many more in the world have to bundle together shacks made of cardboard and wood that offer no protection when the earth shakes or the wind blows?

And looking closer to home within our own nation, our own state, our very own city – we can see that those same problems are just as prevalent here as they are worldwide. Some have, many don't. It's an issue as old as time.

The unfortunate side effect or reaction as a result of financial differences between folks is that sometimes, we forget that the poor also have gifts to offer. We assume they don't know as much or, if they're having financial challenges, they aren't smart enough or don't work hard enough to fix their lives, and we may not take them seriously. But Paul would tell us to dig deeper...looking at the list I just shared with you, these pop out as gifts the poor may be able to offer from their life experiences: ***wise counsel - clear understanding - simple trust.***

No matter the situations, Paul would tell us that we are still one in God's eyes, and we share this time and space together. He would challenge us to seek more unfortunate folks to enfold them in our immediate world – and bring them closer to us so that they can offer what gifts they have. Are we following the model of Jesus, who brought those “others” closer to his heart?

Are we much different, really, from the people of Corinth?

If he could write us a letter, Paul would probably remind us that we are very human, and bring us back to the Truth – to the fact that Jesus told us how we should be, and what we should do in our world to show it, if we believe in him. He would tell us to keep trying to follow the Way of Christ – to keep tossing our crazy mix of personalities, abilities and needs into that giant bowl of experiences and just live in the light of God's love – and let that Love guide our actions each day, in all things.

It begins with recognizing that all of God's children deserve love and have something to offer – and we need to find ways to find them, welcome them, tap into their resources and bring them to use for the good of the whole body.

As Paul said, the Spirit lives in everyone – where do we see it, and how can we encourage it to come forth? As we in this congregation look to the future and to inviting more people to join our family, we might consider how to connect with those who live differently – and who need God and our acceptance – to be whole.

As for ourselves, we should listen to the Spirit remind us that our gifts also are meant to be shared – following the Way of Christ also means that we shouldn't hold back who and what we are as individuals for others in the world. If we can't offer much financially, we all possess other kinds of wealth to draw from as our offering for the good of the community...in many ways, the best “gifts”

aren't worth money at all. Emotional support, strong and willing backs, a sense of humor or hope, an hour or two of free time – these are as worthy as anything money can offer.

When I look out at all of you and think of who you are and how you impact this church and its life, and the town we live in (because many of you are most certainly reaching outside these walls), I can almost imagine you as pieces of my spiritual tossed salad. Many are the leafy base that supports all the other ingredients. Others are the peppers and olives who add color and flavor to our work. Then, there's the good old stand-by in any salad – ripe tomatoes – dependable, necessary, always included. And finally, a great dressing – the love of God, the gift of Jesus and the spice of the Spirit that pours over us all, that makes us a fine, healthy meal for the world's table indeed.

I hope you're feeling full, if not righteous. We have it all – and it all begins and ends with God's influence in our lives. We have a great recipe – let's share it.

Amen.