

C. I Cor 12:1-13; 27-31
4th Sunday Epiphany

What kind of Christian are you? Someone has classified Christians as enthusiasts, as eggheads, as pray-ers, and as chicken fryers. One of the tasks of every Christian is to clarify and find his or her place in the mission and ministry of the church. The church has a broad commission to "go into all the world and preach the gospel." But not everyone can go. And so the questions that we must face as sincere Christians are: "What am I to do? How do I respond to the call of Jesus Christ?"

Last week, or a week ago, I took a workshop in Denver and in the workshop was a man who had spent some of his ministry in the Carolinas. In fact, one of his appointments was in the center of the sect of Christians whom we call the "snake handlers". They take literally the words in Mark 16:16 "In My namethey will pick up serpents". Anyway this man said that he went into the community with a good deal of certainty that he would be able to liberate the snake handlers from their practices. Fortunately, he allowed himself time to get acquainted, and he discovered that the people who were the snake handlers were like the rest of us, outside the one practice . . nice ordinary good people with varying degrees of Christian commitment....they didn't act differently, they weren't wide eyed fanatics. So he said he came to a point where he ceased to regard himself as a

special Messiah to the snake handlers.

On the way home, I thought of his comments, and it accured to me that all of us are snake handlers at heart. The difference is that they use real snakes, and we use what James Glasse calls spiritual snakes. To the snake handlers, a person must handle snakes to be a first class Christian, but we have other things we have to "handle" if we are to be first rate Christians.

Its that this point that one of the most subtle and debilitating sins enters the church. . spiritual pride. There is no pride like spiritual pride, and there are no snakes like spiritual snakes.

We can see spiritual snake handlers everywhere, even in the Bible...even in I Corinthians 13. There Paul was dealing with the problem of spiritual pride. In the first 3 verses of that chapter we see four groups of spiritual snake, four sorts of spiritual pride...and how they must have been working in the Corinthian church. There were the enthusiasts, the eggheads, the pray-ers, and the chicken fryers.

Imagine being there in the Corinthian church..

Here in one corner are the enthusiasts, and they are saying: "Yes, we are Christians here. We believe in Jesus, we read the Bible, but we know that enthusiasm is the most important thing in the Christian life. We who are full of the spirit know that. Sometimes when we are talking about our

faith we get carried away and start talking in languages ³ that even we don't understand. Now it is the people who have that kind of faith who are really the first class Christians."

Back in the other corner there is a quiet group of the eggheads. They look up from their books for a moment and say: "That's very interesting the way they are acting over there. We, too, think there is a place for emotion in religion. But it is really more important to understand our faith ..its biblical basis, its historical development, its relevance. It is more important that we make clear statements of faith rather than the babbling statements of enthusiasm. That is what makes a first rate Christian..understanding our faith."

Now over near the kneeling rail, on their knees, is the pray-ers. They say: "Oh enthusiasm is fine, and those theological ideas are fine, but it is really prayer that matters. When the church moves forward, it moves on its knees. We who have mastered the art of prayer, we are the real Christians. When we pray, people get well, God hears us and answers us. We are the first class Christians."

Then over in the other corner, by the door to the Kitchen, there are some who seem to be looking down their noses at all the rest. They say: "All that enthusiasm is fine, all that theology is interesting, and certainly it is okay to pray. But we know that when there's work to be done at the church that it is the real Christians who cook the dinners, paint

the rooms, That is what really matters..doing the Lord's work. We are the ones who are the first class Christians. (2)

Here is what Paul wrote to a church where people were talking like that to each other:

If I speak in the tongues of men and angels (the enthusiasts), but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge (the eggheads), and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains (the pray-ers), but have not love I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned (the chicken fryers), but have not love, I gain Nothing. (13:1-3)

Here is what happened. When Paul came to corinth the first time no one had ever heard the gospel. Some of the people who heard it believed and joined up with the infant church. They didn't know the full meaning because each had grasped the gospel with what they had to grab with. Some were struck with a new sense of themselves, some were attracted ~~in~~^{to} the spirituality and entered into that, some were turned on by the ideas and focused on that, still others saw the possibilities in prayer, and yet others saw the need for actively doing the gospel so they gave all that they had and burned themselves out in service. And it was really beautiful. Or was it?

No, when these people with varying experiences of the faith came together, they were in separate camps. Each was so intimately aware of what attracted him to the faith and what it meant to them..that their Christian witness was like

a dial soap commerial: "I speak in tongues; don't you wish everybody did?". "Theology turns me on..what's the matter with you?" "I pray a lot...why weren't you at the prayer group last night?" "Well we were working at the church.. where were you?". So the very gifts they had been given became the source of division.

Paul could have written: "Now, in the interest of getting along, let's all deny our gifts..let's all act the same and not talk about our differences" But thank God he said: "I will show you a more excellent way". Celebrate your gift, but go beyond it and use the one gift which we all have, the gift of love.

But part of the problem is we don't always love each other. What can we do about that?

Well, it involves loving yourself and accepting yourself. You are a creation of God, precious in his sight, and certainly worthy of your own acceptance. But every other person bears the same mark, special and unique. Love is the recognition of that. Here is something Paul says about love:

"Love is patient and kind, love is not jealous or boastful, it is not arrogant or rude. LOVE DOES NOT INSIST ON ITS OWN WAY" (vrs 4,5)

In our life as Christians we can be ourselves and do it our way, and not insist that everyone do it our way.

And Paul gives further advice in I Cor 15:9-10. Or rather he gives a word of testimony: "For I am the least of the

apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain". There was a time when I wanted to do something smashing with my meager gifts. But, now, with Paul, I just want to make sure I don't waste whatever gifts I have. I have found that one of the main ways I waste my gifts is to try to assert them as the ways that everybody ought to live and act..to spend all my energy trying to convince others that they ought to see as I see, to feel as I feel, to know what I know, to do as I do.

I have found that the best way I can use my gifts, is to appreciate the gifts others have and count of them to be who they are - no more, no less. Some of our people have gifts in music, so we all don't have to sing in the choirs, the more should. Then there is normally someone downstairs taking care of our children and we don't have to do that. There is someone to teach Sunday School, usually. That is what makes the church so rich and interesting - and confusing and frustrating.

There is a spiritual snake handler in me - sometimes it is enthusiasm, sometimes it is an idea, sometimes it is prayer, or sometimes it is a job or a service I want to do in Christ's name. The snake handler in me wants everyone to agree with me, to follow me, to do what I want to do. But there is also a loving Christian within me that wants

all the variety of gifts to be expressed. And I say with (7)
Paul: "By the grace of God, I am what I am" And I say to
you: "By the grace of God you are what you are". And I
pray for you and me that his gifts to us will not have been
given in vain.