

Family Connections

1 Corinthians 12: 12-27

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

24th January 2010

Wasn't that an amazing result this past week in the Massachusetts election? Scott Brown, the Republican candidate, beat Martha Coakley, the Democrat, in what is the safest Democratic seat in the United States Senate. A seat held by John F. Kennedy and then by Ted Kennedy for well over 50 years. What a surprise! I suppose in Canadian terms it would be something akin to the Liberals winning a federal election in the Conservative stronghold of Crowfoot, Alberta. Or, like Dunkin' Donuts winning a greater share of the market than Tim Horton's. Or, like the Petes winning the Stanley Cup. Yes, the Massachusetts election was a real turn up for the books.

But there's an even more surprising U.S. election than that. At the very end of the 1992 election in Connecticut, the Democratic and Republican candidates for governor suddenly discover something about themselves that leaves them speechless ... well, according to the fictional scenario that Jeffrey Archer paints in his book *Sons of Fortune*, a series of events works themselves out over a lifetime before coming to a head at the election.

Set in Hartford, Connecticut, Archer's novel is a tale of the Cartwright twin brothers separated at birth in the late 1940s. The boys are the sons of an insurance salesman and are born in the same hospital as the baby of a wealthy couple who have had a string of miscarriages. When the baby of the wealthy couple suddenly dies, a nurse wishing to spare the couple further grief, switches the dead baby for one of the twins and the parents of the twins are told that only one has survived.

The Cartwright boys grow up in their separate homes and mature into men who lead separate but successful lives, one becoming a prominent criminal lawyer while the other becomes a distinguished banker. Both experience a great deal of good fortune but this fortune is tempered by no small amount of tragedy, betrayal, loss and hardship. As they move towards their separate destinies, they also move closer and closer to each other until they find themselves locked in mortal combat as political enemies. Just before the election, one of them is involved in a serious car accident and requires a blood transfusion. The blood required, though, is of a very rare type and when the other responds to a public appeal, doctors reveal to them the fact that there is a fraternal relationship between them. They are brothers. They are twins. They have spent their lives separately and independently as adversaries and antagonists only to discover that they are related by deep family connections.¹

Isn't this, in a way, the story of the early church, 2,000 years ago? The Christians of these times in all the different churches that Paul had set up were adversaries and antagonists. They fought and feuded, competed and contended with each other, each going their own separate ways, each trying to further their own agenda – without any concern for any other Christians whatsoever.

But then Paul lands a startling revelation upon the early Christians every bit as life-changing as the one that hit the Cartwrights. "You are not separate," Paul tells the believers, "You are connected. You are related. In fact, you are family. One family. One family of God's people ... All of you are Christ's Body and each one part of it."² Furthermore, he tells them, just as in the human body, the different parts of the church family should not work independently of each other for their own good but must work for the good of the whole Body of Christ. Not looking simply to their own interests but to the higher interests of the whole church. You must always remember, he constantly impresses on them, no matter what differences you may have as human beings, as Christians you have family connections. Deep family connections. You are brothers. You are sisters. "All of you are Christ's Body and each one part of it."

No doubt, St. Paul wrote these words in 1 Corinthians in response to a situation in the early church where everyone was not pulling in the same direction. Indeed, many were going off at tangents in their respective branches of the church and just doing their own thing without any regard for the overall advancement of the church. But Paul emphasised over and over again that this was not the way it was to be. The good of the whole Body must be the overriding concern at all times and in all places.

2,000 years later, in the 21st century church, we greatly need to hear Paul's message and take it to heart. How we love in our congregations to do our own thing. To be our own boss. To do it "my way", as Frank Sinatra sang. How we love in our own denominations – whether Presbyterian, United, Anglican, Roman Catholic or whatever – to operate in our own small corner of the vineyard without reference to other churches in the community, without co-operating in combined acts of worship or in joint ventures of service to the needy. How we love to think we would rather be solitary Christians, worshipping in front of our televisions at home or out in the world of nature, without having to get involved in the nitty-gritty of the life of a congregation.

A minister is preaching hellfire and damnation to his congregation one Sunday morning. "You people in this congregation are all sinners," he declares. In the front row, a man begins to laugh and laugh. The minister is irked and

turns up the volume, “You people in this congregation are all going to face the judgement day.” Again, the man laughs out loud. The minister is red-faced with anger so he ramps things up still another notch and slams the pulpit. “You people in this congregation must repent or you’re going to hell.” The man doubles up with uncontrollable laughter. So the minister stares him down and asks, “Well, what is so funny, may I ask?” With a big smile on his face, the man replies, “This doesn’t involve me because I’m not a member of your congregation.”

But, as Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 12 remind us, in any congregation, there is no such thing as being a Christian and not being involved. There is no such thing as non-involvement. There is no such thing as rugged individualism. There is no such thing as insular denominationalism. There is no such thing as lone-ranger discipleship. To be a Christian is to remember that we have family connections. To be a Christian is to be part of the Body and working at all times for the greater good of the Body – and for the glory of him who is the Head of the Body.

Writer, Donald B. Strobe, points out how much more effective the Church of Jesus Christ becomes when we remember we are connected together as one family and act as one Body. He says, “It seems that somebody wondered why Canadian geese fly only in the “V” formation. The question was taken by specialists in aerodynamics and two engineers calibrated in a wind tunnel what happens in that “V” formation. Each goose, in flapping its wings, creates an upward lift for the goose that follows. When all the geese do their part in the “V” formation, the whole flock has a 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew alone. Each, then, depends upon the others to get to its destination.”³

Just think of that! On this analogy, the Church of Jesus Christ is 71% more effective when it connects together as one Body than when its different parts act individually. 71% better at proclaiming the Good News. 71% better at serving the community. 71% better at making new disciples. 71% better at feeding the hungry of the world. 71% better at combating the evil of violence and the injustice of poverty. 71% more effective at advancing the cause of Christ’s Kingdom in our world.

Which means that we are also 71% more effective in our relief work in Haiti because, rather than going it alone, we are working together with our church partners and Christian aid agencies from around the world. If it was just a matter of our Presbyterian Church in Canada’s World Service and Development trying to work in solitary splendour down there we would be achieving next to nothing in that desperate situation. But because we are tied into one of the largest humanitarian global alliances, we can achieve so much more. Not just 71% more effective, in fact, but 130% because through our involvement with ACT International, the Action of Churches Together, the practical relief and social justice

arm of the World Council of Churches, we are working together with 130 different churches and agencies from every continent in the world.

The great strength of ACT International is that it is the Body of Christ, the family of God in action in Haiti. As such, it has deep and long-standing ties with Haiti and with its many churches at grassroots level. Unlike some aid agencies who are going into Haiti for the first time, ACT International has had workers there for decades, long before the earthquake took place. ACT draws on and involves the people of the local churches, not just delivering emergency aid, but empowering them to rebuild their own country.

In its mission statement, ACT International says, “ACT members’ strong local roots enable the alliance to provide locally based knowledge, analysis and understanding of emergencies and disasters. ACT recognises that, as important as identifying vulnerabilities and providing for people’s immediate needs are when crises occur, a vital component of its response is recognising the valuable gifts communities in crisis contribute: coping mechanisms and strategies for survival, skills and strengths, wisdom and knowledge, and resilience and courage. Strengthening local capacity lies at the heart of our responses to emergencies.”⁴

During this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, let us recognise once again how the great strength of the church lies in it constantly remembering that it is the Body of Christ. Let us recognise also how much more effective we are when we remember that we Christians have deep family connections through him who is the Head of the Body. And let us pray that the strength and effectiveness of our unity may continue to be translated into practical action as the church of Jesus Christ seeks to serve the people of Haiti in their time of desperate need.

© George A. Turner

St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church

Peterborough, Ontario

¹ Jeffrey Archer, *Sons of Fortune*, St. Martin’s Press, 2003

² 1 Corinthians 12:27

³ Donald H. Strobe, “The Jesus Connection”, *Dynamic Preaching*, 2005. www.eSermons.com

⁴ ACT International, *Action By Churches Together*, <http://www.act-intl.org/>