

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
August 12, 2012
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The Olympic Games of Faith: No Trash Talk

1 Corinthians 14:1-19 NRSV Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy. 2 For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit. 3 On the other hand, those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. 4 Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church. 5 Now I would like all of you to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. One who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up. 6 Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I speak to you in some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? 7 It is the same way with lifeless instruments that produce sound, such as the flute or the harp. If they do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is being played? 8 And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? 9 So with yourselves; if in a tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is being said? For you will be speaking into the air. 10 There are doubtless many different kinds of sounds in the world, and nothing is without sound. 11 If then I do not know the meaning of a sound, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. 12 So with yourselves; since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church. 13 Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. 14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unproductive. 15 What should I do then? I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also. 16 Otherwise, if you say a blessing with the spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say the "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since the outsider does not know what you are saying? 17 For you may give thanks well enough, but the other person is not built up. 18 I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you; 19 nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

I don't know about you, but seeing the amazing feats of physical achievements during the Olympics has sometimes reminded me of my own attempts at sports. Of course, thinking about those didn't take too long because I am about as talented an athlete as I am a vegetarian cook. After all, my choice of college Physical Education classes was riflery where the whole point was to become as absolutely still as possible. My most sustained athletic endeavor was a long time ago; all through elementary

school, I played on a summer little league team. Actually, the word “played” there probably should be put in quotes since where I usually found myself was in right field, during innings in which we were so far behind that my adding to that deficit wouldn’t matter. There was one particularly fearsome team in the league with the appropriately fearsome sounding name of the Screaming Eagles (my own team’s name – the Green Parrots – was slightly less fearsome, unless we wanted our opponents to laugh themselves into defeat). Not only were the Screaming Eagles known for their ability to play really, really well, they also excelled at what is called “trash talk.” I am sure most of you know what I’m talking about – various insults and imprecations shouted at a batter when he was up to the plate. Of course, this was a kinder and gentler era, and so the trash talk of our day was on the order of “Your mother wears army boots.” I remember during one game, we apparently decided that we weren’t going to win on skill, so maybe we should try this tactic instead - and all the members of the Green Parrots began their own trash talk one inning, seeking to slur and slam and intimidate the other teams’ batters. We only did this one inning though. Because when we went back in the dugout, the coach in a stern and disappointed voice that I can recall even 50 years later, said **“Boys, on this team, we don’t talk trash. Ever. Period.”**

There is a sense in which this is exactly the message that Paul was sending in our scripture for this morning to his beloved, fighting, fractious church family in Corinth. The Corinthian church could seemingly find endless things to fight about and now they were fighting about how language should be used – and they could well be said to be talking trash about one another and that’s what Paul was wanting to put a stop to. For you see, in the Corinthian church there were those who evidently spoke in “tongues.” That is, they were given to outbursts that were not in any recognizable language and which were meant as a way to praise God. And while Paul doesn’t deny that this is one of the spiritual gifts that God sometimes grants to some folks, he also makes it very

clear that this sort of language has some pretty severe limits. Why? Well, right in the middle of our scripture for this morning is this line: *“Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I speak to you in some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?”* Why does he say this? Well, throughout his writings, the two-fold test that Paul **always** applies when he talks about a church’s practices in any respect is this: does this or that practice “upbuild” the community, and does it show God more clearly to those who don’t know the gospel? If some practice doesn’t do these things, then it is no better than trash talk.

What do I mean? Well, this morning I want to think about this notion of “speaking in tongues” versus “speaking with understanding,” as it applies to the “tongues” that you and I **hear** all around *us* in *our* culture, the kinds of language that the world too often uses that too often get inside us, which inadvertently shape us, but which are not, in fact, “upbuilding” of our lives as Christian persons. And, by the way, next week, I want to come at this same passage from the other direction, and talk about the kind of “tongues” that you and I may ourselves be **speaking** and how that can either be good or not-so-good from the perspective of Paul’s two-fold test, of how we can find ourselves utterly unintentionally speaking trash talk. So, this week **listening** to tongues; next week **speaking** in tongues. Let’s briefly look, then, at three kinds of “tongues” that are heard all around us, but which do **not** lead to the upbuilding of our lives as Christians.

The first is the language of **individualism**. I don’t know if any of you read Judith Martin’s “Ms. Manners” etiquette columns or books, but she is always full of apt and pithy advice, and the questions she receives are an indication of just how rampant this language, this “tongue,” of individualism is in our culture. One of the perennial questions that she receives has to do with weddings; a bride or groom will write in

saying something like *"It's MY wedding, isn't it, so I can do anything I want – I can make the bridesmaids wear hideous dresses, I can exclude my sister from the wedding party because she's too fat or too skinny, I can not invite my brother to the bachelor party because he's a stick-in-the mud."* And Ms. Manners always answers the same way: No, it's **not** just your wedding, and no you are **not** entitled to do whatever you want. It's a celebration of the *relationships* – family and friends – who have brought you to this day, it's an opportunity to give thanks to God and to those who have helped to form you by showing them your gratitude, and it would be childish and even offensive to make the people that you most claim to care about uncomfortable on this day. But some can find this terribly hard to hear because they are so steeped in the language, the "tongue," the trash-talk, if you will, of hyper-individualism.

Now, Paul might have said the same thing. The language that we let get inside us, form us, and shape us needs always, for Paul – just like for Ms. Manners – to be a language that takes into account the fact that we are part of a community of persons and a community of faith, and that what we let ourselves hear, the "tongues" that we let get inside us, will affect our relationships with these ones. You've heard me use this line before, but it is very apt for this day, and this topic, and this scripture: *There are no self-made Christians*. Why is that so? Well, someone had to teach you the faith, using a language, a "tongue," that was not individualistic at all. Someone – probably more than one "someone" – sacrificed for you. Someone – and actually many, many "someones" – through countless words and actions which embodied those words, those "tongues," showed you how to be, how to act. This "tongue" of hyper-individualism in our culture insidiously but surely tears apart the fabric that holds us together as people. It does not upbuild us as individuals or as Christians. And so what is the alternative language we should instead be listening to? It is the language of **gratitude** that we should let shape us. It is the language, the "tongue," of always asking *"how will this*

thought, action, deed affect those who are connected to me?" My friends, listen hard for **that** language, **that** "tongue," and indeed let it be the voice that you pay attention to!

A second language, a second "tongue," that is heard all around us and which is not one we should listen to is the language of what I call "**easy violence**." When Barbara and I lived in West Texas, one of the stores ran an ad in the newspaper at Christmastime suggesting that the perfect gift for Christmas was an assault rifle. Really. This is an example – extreme, admittedly – of a cultural language and "tongue" that is heard too often. Now, there may well be occasions in the life of a society or nation in which violence is a last resort – but it is never a first resort. And on those occasions when violence must be used, it should be the farthest thing from "easy violence," but in fact should be accompanied by a sense of regret and the realization that resorting to violence is a hard, hard choice to make. But what concerns me more and more in our culture is the language, the "tongue," of using violence as a **first** resort. When we let *that* language get inside of us, it coarsens us, it makes us less able to deal with the wonderful but sometimes messy realities of living life in community. Such language, such a "tongue," is not "upbuilding" of our Christian lives at all. It is instructive to note that in all his correspondence with the Corinthian church – a church, by the way, that just about drove Paul crazy with their fights and factions – Paul never said, "*Ok, just go kick their you-know-whats!*" This doesn't mean that he didn't sometimes chide them and show his anger with them, but he never counseled any sort of "easy violence" against one other. Instead he patiently and persistently reminded them that they needed to work at hearing the language of their God who was persistently patient with them.

And what is the antidote for the language, the "tongue," the "trash talk," of "easy violence"? It is to let yourself instead pay attention to those other languages that more

benefit a life that would be Christian; as Paul says in Philippians instead pay attention to whatever is true, and honorable, and just, and commendable (Phil. 4:8). **Those** languages are around us too, but they can be harder to hear. But they are well worth tuning your ears to listen for.

There's a final language, a final "tongue," that is all around us, whispering and shouting in our ears and which does nothing to build us up and that is the language of **"conspiracy and assuming the worst."** This is a tongue, a way of talking trash, the gets louder and louder all around us every election season. In anxious times – which surely we live in! – the language, the "tongue," of conspiracy and assuming the worst gets louder and more pronounced and more shrill. But, my friends, such language in our ears, affecting our actions, doesn't upbuild us at all. It tends to make us becoming narrower and more suspicious people. We begin to question the motives of people where there is no need of questioning. We begin to see every disagreement as a sign that someone "must be" hiding something. We begin to attack the person instead of confront with respect and civility his or her ideas. These are not good things, this is not a good language to pay attention to. But what is the alternative? I have cited St. Ignatius' rule from many centuries ago, but it is just as valid today: **"Always exhaust every possible positive interpretation of every person, situation, or statement before assuming the negative."** Is that the sort of attitude we hear in the "tongues" all around us? Sadly, not so much! There is something in the air that we breathe these days that would urge us instead to *start* with the negative and only end up with the positive when we are 100% satisfied with something or someone. There is something insidious in our common life that calls to us to demean and demonize those with whom we disagree. But letting that language, that "tongue," that sort of trash-talk get inside you will make you a narrower and more fearful person than you need to be, and it will

more and more cut you off from people. That is hardly upbuilding of your Christian life or character. Will you get “burned” sometimes by starting out assuming the best rather than the worst? Of course. All of us have lived too long and too much not to know that that is true. But is it good or right or reasonable or upbuilding to take the opposite tack so that we will never get “burned”? I don’t think so. Suspicious people cannot abide very well in the gracious love of God, and they certainly can’t share that love very well if they are always starting out assuming the worst about others. Now, none of us intend this; but I know that in my life it takes a conscious effort to turn off those “tongues” in my head that the culture around me is using that urge me to be suspicious and skeptical. But naming the problem is the first step towards dealing with it, and I invite you to join me in making the effort to notice when you are starting out by assuming less than the best about something or someone, and consciously trying instead to assume and speak the best. I think both you and I will find it life changing.

For that life changing transformation that God offers us, for language that indeed upbuilds, for ways of speaking that counter and say **no** to the individualism, the easy violence, and the sin of assuming the worst heard all around us, for our ability to say, along with my long-ago coach, “we don’t do trash talk. Ever” – thanks be to God!