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The Olympic Games of Faith 2: Eyes on the Prize

From 1 Corinthians 14 NSRV ...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.... 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? 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?... 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. 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. So with yourselves; since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church. Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unproductive. 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. 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? For you may give thanks well enough, but the other person is not built up.... in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

There is an old preacher's joke that goes like this: A congregation called a new preacher. And on the preacher's first Sunday there, she preached a great sermon, full of life, excellent Bible interpretation, memorable stories, and an eloquent call to action for the hearers. Everyone thought it was great. The following Sunday, she preached the exact same sermon again. There was a little puzzlement among the congregation, but no one said anything – "She's just moved here and maybe in the midst of all the stress she just forgot." The third Sunday, she again preached the exact same sermon as on the first Sunday. Now there were lots of rumblings and many meetings in the parking lot and the phone lines were burning: "It was a good sermon the first time, but

what's going on?!?" Finally, on the fourth Sunday, she did it again: she preached the exact same sermon. Well, the Elders had a meeting after church and asked her to explain herself and why she kept preaching the exact same sermon. She said, "*Well, you all haven't done what I said to do in **that** sermon yet; why should I preach another one?*"

Well, **this** preacher knows better, but, if you were here last week, you know that this is the very same scripture that I preached on last week, Paul's words to the always fighting and feuding Corinthian church, about speaking in tongues versus, as he calls it, speaking with understanding. And in that sermon I spoke of the kind of "tongues," the kinds of languages, the kinds of – as I called it – "trash talk" that is all around us and which we should try very, very hard not let influence us or become our ways of speaking. They included languages of what I called hyper-individualism and easy violence and presuming the worst. And if the point of that sermon was to talk about the "tongues" that we should NOT let be influencing our on ways of speaking, this week's sermon, the reason for looking one more time at Paul's words, is to focus on the kinds of "tongues," the kinds of languages that we **should** have as Christians.

Now, when you think about it, every family has it "tongues," its special ways of speaking that are part of life in that particular relationship. Every married couple has a special "tongue," a way of speaking that is exclusive to them, or code words that they use when they want to communicate with each other but no one else. I knew a couple once whose special marital tongue for boring parties or other events that they were at and which was used when one of them wanted to leave was to drop the word "armadillo" into a sentence. That was the signal, the tongue, that the signified that the

armadillo-invoker was ready to leave. Every child knows how to interpret the special “tongues” that his or her parents use that mean “You’re on thin ice!”

But sometimes the language, the “tongues,” in a family, or in a relationship, begin to fail. There are certainly marriages - probably most of them - that occasionally go through some rough times when husband and wife could swear that they are speaking totally different languages and that neither can understand the other. Most teenagers and parents go through a few years together when they could each swear that the other was suddenly speaking an utterly incomprehensible foreign language and where understanding just seemed to stop. Now, of course, usually parents and their children become fluent together again in the same language in a few years, embodying the truth of Mark Twain’s wry observation that when he was a boy of fourteen, his father was so ignorant he could hardly stand it. But when he got to be twenty-one, he was astonished at how much his father had learned in just seven years.

Even churches sometimes find themselves speaking languages that are harder and harder to understand, and, when that is the case, their mission gets jeopardized. That’s what was happening at the congregation in Corinth, where one could easily say that the reason they were fighting so often was that they were speaking completely different languages, different tongues. I have always thought that it was a testimony to God’s grace that despite the very different languages and “tongues” they spoke to one another with, and despite all the things they found to fight about, that church grew and flourished.

Which leads me to ask, though: **Why?** Why was that so? Why didn’t they just fritter themselves away to nothing with all their fights? They remind me of the old joke

about the man who spent 20 years alone on a desert island. When he was finally rescued he was showing his rescuers around; they complimented him on the little church he had built but were puzzled that a few yards away there was another, almost identical, church. When they asked the man about this, he said, *“Oh the first one was my first church before I got mad there and left.”*“ What kept the Corinthian church from ending up the same way? What part of God’s grace did they latch on to and which allowed them not to be the first in a too-long series of churches which conflict ended up closing?

This week I searched Google news for those stories about the Olympics that used the phrase “eyes on the prize.” There are over 15,000 such stories! It’s a good phrase. It reminds us that in any endeavor it’s essential to focus on the most important thing, it’s essential not to become distracted by the stuff that would lead you away from the goal. The astounding performances we saw in the Olympic Games were in no small part due to the fact, that indeed, these amazing athletes kept their eyes firmly fixed on the prize of doing the very best that they could, of winning a medal for themselves and their countries – even amidst all the things that tempted their eyes and their attentions elsewhere. It was the same, finally, with the Corinthian church: Even amidst the feuding and fighting, they kept their eyes on the prize. And that prize was what Paul reminded them of over and over again, the test that he kept asking them to subject all their actions to; do you remember how I identified that last week? Paul’s first test for *any* church practice, *any* church language, *any* church “tongue” and way of speaking is this: does this or that practice or language or “tongue” or way of behaving “upbuild” the community? But he also has a second test, a second part of the prize, and that is this:

do those practices, languages, and “tongues” show God more clearly to those who don’t know the gospel? That is finally the most important thing to Paul about the nature of Christian community - that a congregation never let itself *even inadvertently* keep the gospel from those who don’t know the gospel, to keep the good news of Jesus Christ from those who are hurting or hopeless. For Paul’s insistence is the same as what church consultant Bill Easum said 2000 years later: *“the church is the only institution in society that exists finally for the sake of those who are not part of that institution.”*

And so that’s what Paul was saying to the Corinthians about how to speak and act so as to not hinder those who were seeking from finding. And he is blunt as always, isn’t he? *“...if you speak in a tongue that is not intelligible,” he says, “how will anyone know what is being said? If you say a blessing in a tongue, how can anyone who is an outsider say the ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving, since the outsider does not know what you are saying?”* In other words, Paul is saying that if the language, the “tongues,” the practices, the ways of doing things are not comprehensible to what he calls “outsiders,” then the chance could well be lost of sharing something with them that could change their lives and which they may desperately need to know. **The bottom line for Paul is that everything we do must always seek to make Christ more available to those who don’t know Him.**

What does all of that mean for us here at First Christian Church? As a way into answering that let me tell you a story: when I was a teenager, the congregation that my parents and I were members of built a new building. It was lovely, and the congregation committed itself to beautiful music and worship and to being a community of caring.

They were and are good folks. The congregation loved worshiping in that new sanctuary. And visitors came. But one of them - probably more honest than most - one Sunday said to the pastor *"Is there some secret here that I am not supposed to be aware of?"* The pastor, startled, said *"No, of course not; why do you ask?"* The visitor said *"Well, there are all these references in the bulletin and newsletter and in the way people talk about the 'narthex.' I don't know what or where that is. Is it some kind of code?"* The pastor then realized, even in that long-ago time when folks were much more likely to be a part of and familiar with church than they are today, that the congregation was inadvertently speaking a "tongue" that was unintentionally failing to communicate and leaving someone who wanted to be a part a part of their community uncomfortable. Someone had decided, influenced by the beauty of the church, to choose an equally beautiful and dignified word - *narthex* - to describe what in most churches would have been called the foyer or atrium, and in any business would have been called the lobby. But the unintended *effect* of this choice of words, this choice of "tongues," was in fact to **fail** to communicate!

The question that I would ask and which I hope every one of us asks! - is whether we here at First Christian have our own set of "narthexes" - that is, do we have ways of speaking or acting or doing that are wonderfully and even beautifully intended, but which inadvertently instead end up being a kind of "tongue" which isn't understandable to many. And as we ask that question we have to keep something very important in mind, something that for many of you may well be very, very hard to imagine but it is true: for many, many people the thought of entering a church is a daunting and even terrifying prospect. In fact, use your imaginations to put yourselves

in the minds of those who may, for example, be having a crisis in their lives, or who are feeling spiritually empty and hungry, and who want to find something that is sustaining. They know that churches are “supposed” to be the places that such can be found. But they are aware that they don’t know the “rules,” they haven’t been a part of a church in twenty or thirty or forty years, if ever. And it can just be very, very daunting to walk into a place that seems so foreign and unknown even when you are very, very hungry. Moreover, in this day and time, many, many people have experienced “the church” as a place where people get “bashed on.” In fact, a recent survey of twenty-somethings about the adjectives that come to mind when they hear the word “church” discovered that two of the top adjectives are boring and bashing!

In the midst of all of that then, it is imperative that we keep our eyes on the prize, it is imperative that we constantly ask ourselves if we are speaking in “tongues,” if we have practices that inadvertently make it more daunting for those folks to walk through our doors here? In my column in our church newsletter, The Visitor, that will be published this week, I talk about one such practice that I think we need to re-think because of the way that it inadvertently keeps us from truly being as welcoming and as “radical hospitable” as we truly want to be. I’m going to let you look forward to that and then let’s talk. But in the meantime, I have a challenge for each one of us, starting with me: I want all of us to ask ourselves where are those things about our life together where we may well be speaking in tongues that are unintelligible? And perhaps even more painfully, where are those places in your own Christian life where you may be putting your own tastes, your own desires, ahead of an opportunity to truly make a newcomer feel at home? My wife Barbara wisely says, for example, that every worship

service should have music in it that she both likes and dislikes, because that probably means that someone else will find the things that are not to her taste the very things that bring them closer to God. How about you? How about all of us? How can we better practice, as Paul says, speaking “intelligibly,” even at the cost of some of things we may love but which no longer communicate? Will you join me in continuing to look for those? Will you join me in praying to God that we will indeed put the needs of those who don’t know the grace that we know ahead of our tastes and our likes and our dislikes? With God’s help, I know indeed that we can do so!