



Poff, Stephen: Guarding Words and Actions, 2009.

Greetings!

Please read [1 Corinthians 13: 1-13](#)

The last couple of weeks of the Epistle lection highlight Paul's imagery of the Body of Christ. It has not failed to offer comfort, challenge and a bit of a WOW factor. Epiphany is observed on January 6. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines Epiphany as:

- (1) : a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something.
- (2) : an intuitive grasp of reality through something (such as an event) usually simple and striking.
- (3) : an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure.

As a spiritual season of the Christian year, we are invited into the narrative of those who came to the child in Bethlehem. They experienced God's disclosure of God's love and grace to the world in the form of Jesus. We have come a long way from that bucolic sense of the infant Jesus. Today we find ourselves fraught by operational and societal fragileness. Can we still have an Epiphany? Can God still disclose Godself in our midst? It seems difficult or nearly impossible!

We are blocking our own view. We are interrupting God's disclosure by going through the motions. Often, we find ourselves unprepared for the openness of the Spirit's leading. Our readiness to receive the Lord and the power of the spirit correlate with our own preparations, as the hymn writer suggests: to "prepare him room."

Our lack of spiritual preparation opens us up to other possibilities. When there is a vacuum, it will be filled! Caught by our embarrassment of not being prepared and our constant denial of this, we obstruct or obfuscate, entrenched in our political and cultural identifies which have filled our unprepared souls. We are in a place where

politics and tribalism have pushed the *still small voice* away and have made us afraid of each other.

But we need each other. None of us are experts on all matters. Yet why do we live this way? We are living in a season of individualism. We believe the old [Burger King commercial](#) more than the Gospel! But there is no individualism in the teaching of Jesus. He had such a keen sense of how to bring people together.



Reva, Mikha: 21st-Century, Odessa Children's Hospital, Ukraine.

Consider:

- The Good Samaritan story ([Luke 10: 25-37](#))
- The woman at the well ([John 4: 4-42](#))
- The stoning of the woman caught in adultery ([John 8: 1-11](#))
- The disciples in the storm ([Matthew 8: 23-27](#))
- Water into Wine ([John 2: 1-11](#))
- Sermon on the plain ([Luke 6: 20-49](#))
- Sermon on the Mount ([Matthew 5-7](#))
- Feeding the 4,000 ([Matthew 15: 29-39](#))
- Feeding the 5,000 ([Matthew 14: 13- 21](#))
- The Gerasene Demonic ([Mark 5: 1-20](#))
- The Garden of Gethsemane ([Matthew 26: 36-56](#))
- The Father and Son ([Mark 9: 14-29](#))
- Syrophenician Woman ([Mark 7: 24-29](#))

These stories of Jesus show the power of gathered community and the failure of self-interest. In his preaching, teaching and healing Jesus demonstrated concern for others. One might draw a conclusion that to be a follower of Jesus is to be inclusive and not sectarian. You may come from a place, a viewpoint, a social location, a theology that feels individualistic, but it is not. Jesus brings each person's experience and life together as if they are threads in a tapestry. There is no tapestry made of just one single thread. The Apostles brought this together in their work in spreading the Gospel from their experience at Pentecost.

While the trajectory of the Gospel is clear, single thread thinking is damaging to community and culture. Jesus noticed that and made it a focus of his ministry, as can be seen in the texts. Jesus' doxology of the Godhead is the appeal of bringing all people unto him, setting forever the multicultural nature of the church. This was destroyed by Christian nationalism and the State Church and these notions continue today in our own nation. Christian nationalism can make a lot of excuses and overlook its abuses in the marginalization of people through its lack of cultural competency in the promotion of one dominant ethos. This missed mark of faithfulness has caused intense pain. It has exacerbated the hurt of the world through an intentional disregard for the beloved community that the Holy Spirit breathed into being in Jesus' Farewell Discourse found in the Gospel of John and in its fruition at Pentecost. Our broken church is calling for our attention.

The rumors of war in the Crimea and in Ukraine have given me a flashback to the 1980s when I was a teenager. I often worried about nuclear annihilation. Now it seems quaint, but then it was a real worry. In 1983 there was a made for TV movie

starring Jason Robards, titled [The Day After](#). It involved the destruction of Lawrence, Kansas from nuclear war. With massive viewership of over 100 million people and 62% of the TV audience for that day in history, it caught the imagination of our culture. I was 16 at the time and it had a very negative impact on me. For a long time I was sure that nuclear war by mistake or by failure to be siblings of each other would lead to the end of life as we know it.

I am 40 years older and have some life experiences under my belt. I have had educational experiences through serving continuously in the church since 1985. I am now a voter, married, and own a home. What concerns me now is the same thing that concerned me then - that individuals, single threads, are more important than the whole. Hubris, hate and intolerance, fear of the other are matters before us. Forty years ago I wondered if I really hated the Soviets. I didn't, but I was afraid. Do I hate Russians today? No, but I am afraid. Do I hate fellow citizens of the United States that I am at odds with politically? No, but I am afraid. Do I hate people in the church where I disagree in matters of theology life, and practice? No, but I am afraid. Why? Where have I failed myself? How have we failed each other?

Many of the institutions that we hold most dear are in great trouble. We need to dig deep here because institutions are made up of people. The institutions are not in trouble, we the people, are in trouble. We are not taking care of ourselves spiritually and the cost is staggering. Our desire to see the glass half empty instead of half full is leading us in our failure – to check avarice and the thirst for power – to live vicariously through others that we do not even know. We have cajoled ourselves into the belief that a whole host of influencers are our best friends and have our best interests at heart. They do not! The power of Jesus' teaching and the Gospel is continuously supplanted by Christian nationalism and other "isms" instead of the humility of gathered community. These Epiphany texts have been standing in witness to us.



Faith, Hope, and Charity: Bas relief sculpture of the three theological virtues, St. Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh, United Kingdom. Undated.

The Apostle Paul noticed this in Corinth. He offered a letter to the church, in fact two of them. A little study of that fledgling community tells us that self-interest and sin nearly tore them apart - deep imagery that couldn't be any more personal. Here we find words about the body and its intricacies and the utter dependence of functionality together. Paul's methods to get people in the church together in all their differences is profound and necessary. Chapter 12 and its imaginative metaphoric language culminate in Chapter 13. We give voice to it in the notions of **faith**, **hope** and **love**.

And it is these three that reflect two of the most important questions in the Bible:

"Am I my sibling's keeper?"

"Who is my neighbor?"

[Prayer](#)

Perfect Light of revelation,
as you shone in the life of Jesus,

whose epiphany we celebrate,
so shine in us and through us,
that we may become beacons of truth and compassion,
enlightening all creation with deeds of justice and mercy. Amen.

Peace,



Rev. Dr. Todd D. Anderson, West Ohio Superintendent
Ohio River Valley District, United Methodist Church

