“Two People Divided by a Common Language”  
I Corinthians 12:1-11, John 2:1-11  
January 17, 2016  
Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church,  
Milford, Connecticut  
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“England and America are two people divided by a common language.” This pithy quote is variously attributed to George Bernard Shaw, Winston Churchill and Oscar Wilde.

There’s a spiritual point here, so bear with me as I come down and chat with Maureen Groves. Some of you know Maureen and whether you do or not you know that she’s not originally from around here. Isn’t that right, Maureen? But you’ve been here a while, right? (since 1952). So is that a Southern accent I hear? (southern England, born in London).

Tell me, Maureen, what’s your favorite sport? (Football) And what’s your favorite team? (A British soccer team). Oh, so you mean soccer? You told me that you no longer say “a spot of tea” (cup of tea) but that there are some other (Cockney) phrases that are common: “Apples and pears” (stairs), “Saucepan lids” (kids), and my favorite “Buskers” (street performers). Maureen told me that the linguistic difference is so great for Ruth Starcher that when she listens to Downton Abbey she has to watch it twice to catch what folks are saying!

What’s the point of this little cultural and linguistic exchange? Two things emerge for me, and those are the two things I want to share in this message. The first is that what we think we have in common may be undermined by differences, real or imagined. The second is that what we do have in common is far more important than what divides us.

Today’s reading from I Corinthians 12 is familiar to many. As in the hymn we just sang (1), it emphasizes that there are

(1) “Many Gifts, One Spirit,” #114, The United Methodist Hymnal
many gifts but one Spirit. Despite, and because of, the diversity we hold as Christians and as a congregation, there is a single Spirit, God’s Holy Spirit, that unites us. As Paul said, “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.” (I Cor. 3b) Our common confession of fidelity to Christ occurs because of the shared gift of the Spirit.

Sounds easy. It’s not. At least, not always. Some of you know that I served for a decade as pastor of a multicultural congregation in downtown Bridgeport. There, diversity was visible, and folks would often come away inspired at the way people of European, African, Asian and Latin ancestry made working well together look easy.

The staff and leaders knew better. We were attentive to differences that could be misunderstood and misinterpreted and worked to guide the congregation become a learning organization that learned about and appreciated differences. Yet even with that attentiveness, misunderstandings arose.

Here’s one of them, set against the backdrop of Methodism’s historic and current stance against beverage alcohol. This historic stance was born out of the American preachers experience of saloon life on the American frontier. Saloon life promoted gambling, drinking and sexually suggestive dancing. All undermined stable family and community life. While we have learned to dance, Methodists still recognize the inherent dangers of gambling and beverage alcohol.

The members of my Bridgeport church who had roots in the Caribbean had a history, long before I got there, of having a Saturday night celebration called “Caribbean Night.” It was open to all in the church and community and shared food, music, dancing and costumes from the various Caribbean islands. All good. Then came the year that the leaders asked
me if it would be all right to include ginger beer in the refreshments. I said “Of course.” The next morning, Sunday, it was brought to my attention that some members of the congregation who were not present at Caribbean night heard about the inclusion of ginger beer and were very upset. I asked for names and, me being me, approached them and said, “I have heard you are upset.” “Yes, well, pastor, we were just concerned about the presence of alcohol at Caribbean night.” I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, so I simply said, “Well, if they had served ginger ALE would you have had the same concern?” Suddenly the light came on. Caribbean ginger BEER is no more alcoholic than American ginger ALE, by which I mean “not at all.” Which some folks of European ancestry learned that day.

Why share this story now, with this congregation? We are a more diverse congregation than we appear. Diversity is not just defined by cultural background. Generational group, gender, sexual orientation, education, economics, region of origin, town geography and family history are all defining characteristics that make us far more diverse than meets the eye. Like the diversity of the threads of a beautiful tapestry, that diversity comes together to paint a wonderful picture if we let it.

But we have to be willing to learn from, and about, one another. We have to be willing to assume the best, not the worst, of our neighbor across the aisle and across the street. It is an act of faith to believe, with St. Paul, that we each possess a gift or gifts and that those gifts are important to the well-being of the whole, whether as a church, a nation or a world. This willingness will serve us particularly well at a certain Fair that happens in June and which is having an organizing meeting today; along with our many other events; along with our ministry and program and administrative operations: in short,
everywhere. Life is hard, why make it harder? Let’s agree that when disagreements arise – as inevitably they must – to give each other some slack and look for the gift in the different point of view.

And let’s agree to learn from one another. Last week’s leadership seminar was helpful and inspiring to many. For me the most important take-away was the reminder that there are different gifts and preferences in leadership style. We self-identified in four groups, the names of which describe well their behaviors: visionaries, organizers, crisis-managers and nurturers. It was great to see WHO was in each group and to be reminded “Ah, yes, THAT’S their gift” and to be reminded “Ah, yes, THAT’S why they annoy me.” And why I annoy them!

Can we laugh at ourselves about these foibles? I hope so. Because I think being able to do so helps us embrace one another in our full humanity and lets our gift shine and lets us appreciate another’s gift. On that point, one of you – I honestly forget who – came up to me and said in all innocence “Pastor Rachel is so different from you!” I laughed and said “Thank God! One of me is enough!” Seriously, in the exercise I mentioned from last Sunday, someone observed that all three pastors were in a different leadership style group. That’s good for the staff and good for the congregation. And several of you mentioned that, in a different time or context, you would have likely placed yourself in a different group. Recognizing that is important, too. Situations and circumstances change. The ability to adapt is key to health, whether in a congregation or community or among friends or family. We don’t have to be defined by style or circumstance because these things change.

So we are sometimes divided when we think we are not, and learning and growing is key to overcoming division. But I said at the outset that there is a second learning in this notion that we are divided by what unites us. That second thing is
that what we have in common is more important than anything that divides us. What we have in common is Jesus Christ. What we have in common is that Jesus is Lord. What we have in common is the Holy Spirit. What we have in common is the mission of the church, to makes disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. What we have in common is love, born in a manger and hung on a cross that we might have life: abundant life, full live, transformational life, life with meaning. Whatever challenges we face – and we will – we must never, ever forget the unifying love of Jesus Christ, revealed by the Holy Spirit and born of God. This powerful love has created a church that has withstood persecution, seen the rise and fall of empires, and brought hope to billions of people through the ages and claims 2.2 billion adherents today. Our mission is to share this love; to learn from one another; to show that we, too, are transformed as we wish others to be; and to never, as we prayed this morning, hear the Head of the church say “This is my body, broken BY you.”

It’s okay to be “two people divided by a common language,” as long as we are one people in the Lord Jesus. Amen.