Growing up, I had a somewhat uneven experience with Christianity. And before I explain what I mean by uneven, let me preface it all by saying that this experience was not the fault of anyone nor did anything intentionally nefarious happen, rather I am saying that I did not quite fit in to the Christian youth culture of the time. I am willing to take the George Costanza route and say it’s not you but me. And I say this because it seems that whenever I take one of those personality tests, the explanation for the group to which I belong starts with a sentence like, “representing less than .07% of society.” But with that caveat out of the way let me explain my uneven relationship with Christianity. The issue I had growing up was with the prevailing Christian youth culture. I just did not get it. I had no idea what was meant by being on fire for the Lord. Large emotional displays of faith made me horribly uncomfortable. I thought Christian rock was awful and, at least according to my high school youth leader, I asked the wrong sorts of questions. As a result, I came to believe that since I did not fit into this culture, I must not actually be Christian. And it took me a rather long time to come back. Because I needed to come to understand that my issue was not with the Triune God rather my issue was with the personality types targeted by the culture. And like I said I am telling this story not to assign blame, but rather as a reminder that people are different and there is not “one way” to be Christian. All kids and adults are not necessarily going to be receptive to a single way of presenting the Christian message. And if you do not believe me look what St. Paul says today. “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.” In other words, in the body of Christ there is a great amount of diversity.

Now, I have generally thought of this passage in terms of individuals within a church congregation. That is in a church you have people who are good at various and diverse things and together this heterogeneity creates a strong church body. In this interpretation the church is like a construction crew, some are roofers, others are plumbers, while others are electricians and so on. And I don’t believe this is a bad reading of the text and furthermore I believe that it describes us pretty well at St. John Chrysostom. We have a wonderful mix of talents and backgrounds. But I wonder if there is something more we can take from this passage; not just the church singular but rather about churches in general. For this passage comes from Paul’s letter to the Romans and the letter is addressed not to a specific church but rather, “To all God’s beloved in Rome.” This greeting implies that rather than Paul writing to one church he is addressing all those in Rome who, at the time of his writing, are Christian and according to historians this was probably a decent sized group of people. Meaning that most likely there were multiple faith communities in the city of Rome at that time. So, my thought is what if he is not simply saying that there is diversity between individuals within a particular church but rather that there is diversity between various churches. For often when we speak of the Church with a capital “C” we are talking about all believers not just one individual church. And if this is the case it is not a stretch to say that certain faith communities may be different than other faith communities.

Now since I seem to be on a roll with caveats let me add another. There is something I want to make sure that we are clear about. So let me establish some guardrails. As you know Christianity is incredibly fractured in the United States. You really need to look no further than the city of Delafield to find this. For example, Delafield contains two (three if you believe the dangly sign in front of the Academy) churches that claim to be in the Anglican communion. One is us and the other is St. Michael’s. We were formed in 1851 and St. Michael’s was formed in 2010 mainly by a group that broke off from Zion Episcopal Church in Oconomowoc. Meaning that they exist not because one church ran out of space or found a mission opportunity but rather because they disagreed with the direction of Zion Episcopal Church. And this is not the kind of diversity I am not promoting; the type that arises from people not being able to agree or at least find ways to stay together in their disagreement. And before I finish this caveat, I should point out that I am not making a judgment on who was right and who was wrong. Rather am pointing out that diversity which happens because of fighting and disharmony does not strengthen the body of Christ.

So, with caveat number two out of the way what I want to talk about is the individual personalities that churches might have. That is, to worship God and to be effective disciples, we are not necessarily all going to look the same. And I mean this not in terms of denominationalism but rather about the personalities and strengths of the people that make up a congregation. Going back to my introduction about not fitting into Christian youth culture in the 1980’s the problem was that there was just one understanding of what the young kids enjoyed and if a young kid did not enjoy it then they must not be Christian. There was a confusion between what spoke to a certain type of personality and what was actually Christian. Different churches are going to worship God in different ways. Just for a simple example. As you know when I celebrate the Eucharist, I face east, that is my back is to you. As best I know no one here has a problem with that but others within the Episcopal Church and worldwide Anglican Communion would be scandalized by my behavior. I prefer the way we do it and I think the symbolism is spot on – I am facing the same direction as everyone else and doing the act on behalf of the congregation. The focus is not on me, but on God. The thing is we have a different personality than other churches and that is not a bad thing. I think so often in the church we mistake stuff we like with the Gospel message. And so rather than acknowledging that we simply are a little different than other churches we take the stuff we like to be the embodiment of the church. But as Paul points out these differences exist as part of a whole. They are not meant to be exclusionary but complimentary.

As I stated in the opening, I had a very uneven relationship with Christianity in my younger years. I was in a place where I did not fit. And I can still remember the first time I experienced an Episcopal service. I was 28 and one of my best friends asked me to be godfather to his son. He was Episcopalian and so the baptism was in an Episcopal Church in Sacramento, California. It was a straight prayerbook service and I was mesmerized. I had never seen a service so beautiful where the words perfectly fit the magnitude of the occasion. And I bring this up as a reminder that there is something pretty great about what we have. It might not be for everyone but that does not make it non-Christian. We are where we need to be. We are an integral part of Christ’s one holy and apostolic church here on earth. Certainly, we may be different from others but we still worship the triune God and worship him in accordance with the gifts bestowed upon us by God so that we may be his own this and forevermore.