

One in Christ, Gifted to Serve

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany, January 20, 2019

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Text: 1 [Corinthians 12:1 - 11](#)

Paul's letter to the church in Corinth gives us a peek into an early Christian community. It seems there is a lot going on there. Early in the letter, Paul scolds them for quarreling amongst themselves. They have met various apostles, including Paul and Peter, and argue among themselves about which of them is correct. Some have become arrogant. A few people have gotten carried away with the whole forgiveness of sins thing and have started doing whatever they want! Some of them have been suing one another, others have been divorcing their wives willy-nilly. Worse yet, they have not been properly observing the Lord's Supper. They've been treating it like a potluck, except they aren't bringing dishes to share. People with means are gorging on bread and wine, while poor members of the community are leaving the table hungry. Turning to today's reading, apparently some of them believed their spiritual gifts were more important than others'. As we read Paul's letters to the Corinthian community, a picture begins to emerge of a divided and dysfunctional assembly. They are separating themselves by class, by status, by philosophy, and by any other means they can come up with. They just can't seem to get it together.

Sound familiar? In our churches, don't we still experience division? I'm not only talking about the endless variety of denominations, but also divisions within the ELCA and even individual congregations. Martin Luther King, Jr. once remarked that Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in the nation, and to a large extent, that's still the case. Churches draw boundaries, carefully including or excluding people based on a long list of variables.

Even among those who have been included, there is a tendency to place a greater emphasis on some gifts over others. When I was a young girl, I remember making a suggestion to my pastor, who said, "You should tell an adult that idea, so that they can take it to council." I thought, "Isn't that what I just did?" Intentionally or not, the message I received loud and clear was that my pastor had no use for my youthful ideas. Then there was that time, when I was my church's choir director, that the choir anthem got cut from an especially long worship service. Outwardly, I pretended to be a team player, but inwardly, I stewed! How dare they cut MY CHOIR?? The MOST IMPORTANT PART of the service??!!! In silly and serious ways, we have a tendency to think of our individual roles as very important, and often discount the gifts that other people bring to the assembly.

Our churches reflect the divisions and dysfunction of our culture. Here we are, a month into a government shutdown with no end in sight, our political parties unable to work together. All over the country, people are divided along every line imaginable - race, class, ideology, political perspective. We argue among ourselves, self-righteously claiming the correct position, imagining our gifts are more valuable than another person's. Unity seems like a faraway dream.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul offers a way forward towards unity, and a fresh take on the gifts God gives us through the Holy Spirit. First, Paul wants us to be informed - this is a teaching moment! We have been misbehaving because we didn't know any better. Second, faith is a gift - no one can say "Jesus is Lord" unless inspired by the Holy Spirit. Their Spirit-given faith is the one thing they have in common and the source of their unity. Third, "unity," according to Paul, does not mean "sameness." Paul lists a marvelous variety of gifts, services, and activities that are passed out by God through the Holy Spirit. Everyone receives a gift, but not everyone receives the *same* gift. It's a divine division of labor. When everyone is using their gifts, and valuing the gifts others offer to the community, the Holy Spirit is active and transforming. We can be different in a million ways, but if we remember our common cause, and put our God-given gifts to work, we can become agents of God's transformative power in the world. Finally, the gifts we have been given can only be activated by the Holy Spirit. They might lie dormant until God needs us to put them to work, but when the time is right, the Holy Spirit arrives and gives us what's needed.

You probably already knew this, but it was a revelation to me to learn in my preaching class at seminary that the most memorable portion of Dr. King's iconic "I Have A Dream" speech was completely improvised. Dr. King was the final speaker of the day, and like most of the others, his planned remarks mirrored the tone set by the march's organizer, A. Philip Randolph, who spoke of a "moral revolution for jobs and freedom." But as Dr. King neared the end, he came to a clumsy sentence. He had planned to introduce his conclusion with a call to "go back to our communities as members of the international association for the advancement of creative dissatisfaction." He skipped that, read a few more lines, and then improvised: "Go back to Mississippi; go back to Alabama; go back to South Carolina; go back to Georgia; go back to Louisiana; go back to the slums and ghettos of our Northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed."

On the recording, you can hear the famous soul singer Mahalia Jackson shout: "Tell them about the dream, Martin!" King looked out over the crowd. As he later explained in an interview, "all of a sudden this thing came to me that I have used — I'd used many times before, that thing about 'I have a dream' — and I just felt that I wanted to use it here." He said, "I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream." And he was off, delivering some of the most beloved lines in American history.

In that moment, in front of an estimated 250,000 people, the Holy Spirit once again activated Dr. King's spiritual gifts - his gifts for prophecy and preaching. That day, Dr. King's words had transformative power. His words planted an indelible image of a possible future in the imaginations of ALL Americans. When you imagine this future, you can't help but to yearn for it. To this day, his Dream is the standard by which the entire nation measures our progress towards freedom and equality. The rest of his speech, by speech-writing standards, was excellent, too. It was well-written, had a good cadence, and used memorable images. Every time I read it or hear it, I am impressed by it, but not moved by it. But the part that was improvised, the part that was activated by the Holy Spirit, makes me cry every time. It is moving because it is transforming. It is transforming because it is the work of the Spirit.

That's what the work of the Spirit always looks like. Paul knew that intimately, having experienced the transforming work of the Holy Spirit himself. Before he encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, he was a self-described destroyer of the church. Afterwards, Paul received the Holy Spirit and was completely transformed. Paul caught the vision of unity through Christ, and began sharing the good news with everyone, even people outside of his own tradition. Paul knew that if the Corinthian church could see their various gifts for what they are - the work of the Holy Spirit - they could experience a similar transformation. He knew that if they could recognize the Spirit's gifts in one another, they would be inspired to work together to share the Gospel and advance God's mission. They would not set aside their differences, but rather celebrate them and put them to use for a common cause.

My friends, I know you have many incredible spiritual gifts. Many of them are embedded in the guiding principles you have identified as a congregation. Some of you have the gift of hospitality, extending a warm welcome not only to those who enter the building, but also to those you encounter in your work and service. Many of you have the gift of service, preparing and serving meals for our neighbors in need. I have discovered that a surprisingly large number of you have the gift of teaching. Some (not me) are blessed with the gift of administration. Others with wisdom and knowledge. Many of you have an ample allotment of faith. All of these gifts have been given to you by the Spirit for the common good, and when the Spirit activates them, some uncommonly good things happen! When this community, made up of all these gifts, is unified around doing God's work, it has a transformative effect, not only on yourselves, but also on this congregation, this city, and all the people your lives touch. The transforming power of the Holy Spirit, activated in you, has the power to heal even the most entrenched divisions. It has the power to plant dreams that grow into change. It has the power to reveal God's glory to a world waiting for some good news.

During this Epiphany season, when we remember that God's glory is revealed to us in Jesus, I invite you to consider the ways God's glory might be revealed through you. What gifts have you been given by the Holy Spirit? What gifts do you see in one another? What dreams ignite your imaginations? Encourage one another to use your gifts. Imagine how you might use them for the common good. Dream big! And dream together.

Prayer:

Gracious God, you give us spiritual gifts and make us agents of your transformative power. Send your Holy Spirit to activate our gifts and inspire our dreams. Draw us into unity with the One who reveals your glory, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, Amen.