

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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I Corinthians 12:1-11

Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore, I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

Body Building

I realized this week one of the reasons I don't often preach on the epistles, on the letters of the New Testament, is that there is often so darn much to unpack.

Take our scripture today, for instance, this section of Paul's letter written to the church in Corinth. What's going on with this "Jesus be damned" language ... or the "Jesus is Lord" language, for that matter? Is that just Paul being colorful, as he is wont to be or is all that germane to the message he is trying to send?

What's important to understand is that Paul is writing in a time when these words meant something we might not immediately get. To understand the statement, for instance, "Let Jesus be cursed" we need to remember that when Paul wrote there was no "New Testament". The Corinthians had Paul's letter, and they had the Torah. The Torah states that "anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deuteronomy 21:23) Paul says, however, the Spirit of God would never prompt someone to say "Jesus be damned" or "Jesus be cursed." Jesus is not simply a man who died on a cross. The early church made bolder claims: that Jesus was risen, Risen indeed, and particularly *in them*, the community of believers.

How about "Jesus is Lord"? No one would be inclined to say "Jesus is Lord" without the prompting of the Spirit Paul says. Well, today you and I could say that, speak those words out loud, and it would not in itself get us in trouble. It would certainly not lead us to be persecuted. But in Paul's day that creed was understood to be directly affronting the Roman Emperor. It was to pledge allegiance *to Jesus*, and not to Rome -- and that in itself could lead to imprisonment and death. To make the statement "Jesus is Lord", therefore, required great courage.

(modernlectionaries.blogspot.com/2013/being a supernaturally gifted servant of God)

Paul is saying then that where people think Jesus was just a man who got strung up on a cross, the Spirit of God has not yet touched them. He is saying that where people are bold enough and courageous enough to say "Jesus is Lord", well, then you know the Spirit has touched them, emboldening them to say that which is not safe to say.

In a way, Paul is engaging in a pretty simple enterprise: He is trying to speak to a Christian community about how to tell when the spirit is at work. In other words, how are Christians to know it is *God* and *God's Spirit* at work in our midst and not ego, or self-indulgence, or personal agenda that is speaking or acting? Such a good question, one that the church still asks today.

What is God up to in our faith community and in our wider community? Do you find that question interesting? Or too vague to get a hold of? We ask this regularly each year at our leadership retreat, and some people dive right in, while others struggle. Maybe this year we can be helped by First Corinthians Twelve.

Paul says that one way to know whether a movement is led by the Spirit is to listen for its claims about Jesus Christ. The Spirit has already made things known to us about Jesus: Jesus loved us so much and loved God so much he went to the cross. Jesus gathers us in a special meal and he gathers us up in resurrection hope – this reality that Jesus has a life beyond his earthly footsteps in Galilee life- - again, the idea that Jesus has a life now in us. Also, by the Spirit we testify that Jesus – not money, security, self esteem, paranoia, power, or anything else – is Lord. “
(Mary Hinkle Shore, www.workingpreacher.org, commentary on I Cor 12:3b-13)
So gifts from the Spirit show Jesus as Lord.

Criteria number two: Gifts from the spirit serve the common good. Just as the Spirit is all about showing forth Jesus as Lord, so the Spirit is all about building up the group rather than enriching individuals. The traditional translation puts it like this: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (I Cor 12:7) But listen to how Eugene Peterson says it: *Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits.*

I just love that, because I think it speaks to one of our deepest aims in being church. It speaks to what I hope we celebrate every time we gather. When someone sings, we are touched in our spirits by their spirit-activated talent. When someone takes time to make us feel welcome, we are touched by their Spirit activated gift of hospitality, when someone teaches us, we are touched by the way the Spirit activates them to share their knowledge and experience. When someone says, “I will write letters to those who are struggling,” or “I will cook meals of love for those recovering from surgery” not only is the Spirit moving, but we see something of who God is in that, we see something of Jesus in that. And when we give our gifts, everyone gets in on it ...everyone benefits. This participation in the body of Christ, it is Spirit led, and it is a holy thing.

There is a third clue... and it is actually one I find comforting. Paul suggests that whatever God's Spirit is doing, *it will probably not be characterized by tidiness*. If you are looking for the Spirit's gifts, look for a bit of the mess. (Mary Hinkle Shore commentary) What this means...gentle reminder here...is the fact that you (you being a pastor, or a long time member, or the church council, or the apostle Paul for that matter) did not think of something doesn't mean it is a bad idea. The Spirit specializes in the opposite of "we've never done it that way before". And the Spirit can hold together many and varied gifts, and many and varied activities, all for the good.

I think of how our church has grown. There are now more activities, more small groups as well. Some years ago, someone told me "there was too much going on." They couldn't do it all. But apart from getting your picture taken in the photo directory and apart from finding some way to offer your time, talent and treasure there isn't the idea in general that there is something by way of church activity you *have to do*. I think of our Harvest Fair and how it has changed over the years. Sometimes things get left off for a year, sometimes they stay "left off" and sometimes they come back. Each Harvest Fair is a different constellation of people offering their gifts and their energy. Just the way each worship service consists of a group that is unique in time, unlike any other week, any other Sunday, in its constitution and in the way the Spirit moves in our midst. The church is a living organic thing, which is why it is never precisely the same from one moment to the next. The cumulative gifts change: we used to have Allyson, now we have Melissa in the choir. A few years back, we had a youth group with strong juniors and seniors in it. Now our strength is more in middle school and early high school years.

The problem of course in Corinth was that some people were really into the drama created by certain gifts – gifts they had -- such gifts as speaking in tongues (a sort of ecstatic worship thing) and healing. The problem wasn't the gift itself, but that people hyper-focused on that gift so that whatever their gift was paramount. What they started to forget was that any power they had was power flowing through them.

What they started to forget was the origination point, namely God. What they started to forget was God and God's *purposes in bestowing these gifts in the first place*, which was for the good of the whole, namely to build up the body of Christ so it could show forth the love and justice of Jesus in our world. Getting "dazzled by the noise, the church ignored the quieter work of the Spirit to draw them into a community that respects all its members." (Mary Hinkle Shore)

Isn't this relevant? Isn't this important for us today? We live in such an age of spectacle. Such an age of disrespect and mockery, such a time of self-aggrandizement and bald-faced personal agenda. The church is called to be different than that. This passage speaks so beautifully to true religion -- as that which serves God for the good of all. This passage could make you wonder: is the person who

quietly comes to worship and prays, simply practicing the holy work of being here, of presence possibly doing something of as much of value as the one who leads a committee, or heads a task force, or organizes a photo directory? When we keep ourselves thinking of the whole, this could be so.

In a moment we'll wrap up this sermon with the words Paul offered to the Corinthians to exhort them to think whole -- the well-known body metaphor passage. Its something the church returns to again and again, because it helps us see things whole.

It isn't easy, of course, to stay together, to find unity, to appreciate the gifts of all but then again, I think part of what Paul is saying is that it's pretty hard to be religious *apart from community*. We might all take comfort in the fact that even the professional religious who live in communities set apart struggle with bumping up against each other, struggle with receiving the gifts of one another, and struggle with having the proper humility about their own knowledge and their own gifts. So, Paul has something to say to us all. Paul lifts our sights to the "still more excellent way" of faith, hope, and love and calls us back to valuing one another more than our own particular spiritual gifts or offerings.

It's easy to be dazzled by the gifts someone else has. We might find ourselves wistful...oh that we could sing like that, or speak like that, or be wise like that person is wise. So here today let us all remember: the person sitting next to you, that person you pass communion to, *that person* needs to matter more than all the spiritual gifts in the congregation – your own or anyone else's. Paul's goal in writing is not a tidy community or a highly efficient community but a deeply loving one.

And if you don't think yourself to be particularly gifted, well that is a whole 'nuther sermon for another day. But if you've been sitting here wondering how to plug some of your personal gifts in here at our church, by all means make an appointment, and we can talk. I do work other days than Sunday, you know?

May we each give our gifts freely, without pride or competition. May we be the body of Christ together.

Amen.