

Many Gifts: One Spirit

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1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Brothers and sisters, I don't want you to be ignorant about spiritual gifts. You know that when you were Gentiles you were often misled by false gods that can't even speak. So I want to make it clear to you that no one says, "Jesus is cursed!" when speaking by God's Spirit, and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

There are different spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; and there are different ministries and the same Lord; and there are different activities but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. A demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good.

A word of wisdom is given by the Spirit to one person, a word of knowledge to another according to the same Spirit, faith to still another by the same Spirit, gifts of healing to another in the one Spirit, performance of miracles to another, prophecy to another, the ability to tell spirits apart to another, different kinds of tongues to another, and the interpretation of the tongues to another.

All these things are produced by the one and same Spirit who gives what is fitting to each person.

Will you pray with me? Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now, the Search Committee assured me that our church is free from conflict, disagreement, hard feelings or difficulty of any sort. They told assured that we all agree about everything and that making decisions about how to build on our past to strengthen our ministry will be easy peasy.

Wait a minute..... Your faces.... That's not true? You don't all agree? Our church is not free from conflict? Wait a minute! What have I gotten myself into???

Okay, okay. I jest. The Search Committee did NOT tell me that our church is free from conflict. In fact, in some of my conversations with the Search Committee, they shared some of the recent sources of conflict in our congregation. A big one was the congregational vote that happened late last spring around the question of marriage equality. They were clear that we do not all agree. We have different feelings about the best way forward -- some of us are ready to become Open and Affirming and some of us may never be ready for that. We do not all agree.

I know from conversations with some of *you* that, as a congregation, we differ on politics. I know we voted different ways in these last mid-term elections and in the Presidential elections two years ago. We do not all agree.

Here in this room, we have different opinions about what the Bible is and how we should read and interpret it. We have different understandings about Jesus, and whether the divine part of Jesus or the human part of

Jesus was more powerful and important. And we probably have as many ideas about who and what God is as we have people in this room. We do not all agree.

So, okay, we are not free from disagreement. We are not free from conflict or difficulty. But you know what? That's not new for the church. For the next three Sundays (today included), we will be hearing scripture from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. And my oh my did they disagree! It's not that they weren't a faithful bunch -- they were! It's not that they hadn't listened to Paul and then Apollos and then Cephas. They had! It's not that they didn't have powerful spiritual gifts among them. They did! But when it came down to the details of living out their faith, the question of which teacher to follow, which spiritual gifts were most impressive and important, and how to relate to one another they did not all agree.

See the church in Corinth was strong and faithful, but it was also experiencing divisions. Why did a church with the fervor, resources and spiritual leadership demonstrated within the Corinthian community have such conflicts? Perhaps because church in Corinth was made up of people from different social and political backgrounds with a variety of life experiences -- Greeks and Jews, slaves and free people, men and women, rich and poor -- and this diversity meant people brought different perspectives on the world. There would have been "sociological, political and religious factors as well as personal and theological differences"¹ that contributed to their disagreements and conflicts.

¹ Dennis Ormseth, Showing the Body: Reflections on 1 Corinthians 12-13 for Epiphany, http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/6-1_Land/6-1_Ormseth.pdf

Sound familiar? It is not always easy to live together and get along. It is not always easy to find common ground for worship and identity when what we bring to the table, what we bring to the community differs so greatly! It is not always easy to agree.

And yet, Paul does not write to tell the Corinthians that they must all agree. He does not write to tell them that they must all strive for the same culture or life experience, that they have to believe exactly the same or that they should try to cultivate the same spiritual gifts. Instead, Paul invites them to focus on what they have in common: their belief in and commitment to following in the way of Jesus. In today's scripture Paul reminds them that all of their spiritual gifts -- gifts that everyone receives -- come from the same Spirit. None of these gifts is more valuable than others, and all are needed. Paul invites them to see their differences, not as a liability or something to judge each other for, not as something that makes their community weaker. Instead, Paul tells them, their diversity, their variety of gifts is intentional. The One Spirit gives a variety of gifts that they may be used for the common good.

Paul's message of unity without conformity, Paul's message of the value of ALL gifts, Paul's reminder that ALL gifts come from the ONE Spirit for the common good is good news, not just for the church in Corinth, but for us, today. Yes, we are different from one another. No, we do not all agree. AND we are called to bring our differences and share them. We are called to bring our differences for the good of this congregation and beyond. We are called to faithfully, prayerfully, honestly, openly listen to one another, to scripture and to God about how God is calling us to use our various gifts, to bring our diverse perspectives, to hold our differing opinions so that our differences may be an asset to us, so that we may more richly share God's love with each other and the world.

This does not mean we will suddenly be free from conflict -- we will not. It does not mean that we will all agree with how to move forward. It DOES mean that our differences are valuable. That we can make room for different ideas and that we can respect and love each other well even as we make decisions together that not everyone agrees with.

See, first and foremost, we are God's church. First and foremost, we are ALL gifted and called by the same spirit.

[We are what you would call a purple church. And usually the idea of purple comes from mixing democrat blue and republican red. And yes, there are democrats and republicans, libertarians and unaffiliated, and maybe even a socialist or green partier among us. But, instead of simply thinking of ourselves as a politically purple church, what if we think of ourselves as a liturgically purple church?

We pull out our purple paraments -- the beautiful material we put on our altar, communion table and pulpit -- during Advent and Lent. These are our seasons of waiting and anticipation. These are the seasons when we prepare for Christ's birth and when we journey with Christ towards the cross. These are the seasons when we prepare our hearts for the Good news of the incarnation, Emmanuel, God with us and when we prepare our hearts for the revelation and redemption of Easter -- the Good News that life is stronger than death, love is stronger than fear or hate, and that nothing, nothing can separate us from God. I think we're that kind of purple church. We are a church of expectation, of revelation, and of Good News. We, like the church in Corinth, are enriched by our differences. All of our gifts come from the one Spirit, and we are called to use them for the good of all -- here in our church and beyond. Thanks be to God!]

This morning, as part of our worship service, we get to recognize the many and diverse gifts within the congregation and those who have been called in specific ways to share those gifts with this community and beyond.