

“Gifted All”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 5, 2024

6th Sunday of Easter

Psalm 36:5-10

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

1 Corinthians 12:4-13

Introduction

In the New Testament, Easter is the great pivot point between the story of Jesus: his life and ministry, his death, and rising again; and Christ’s church: the followers and believers who are gathered as his body re-created, gifted by the Spirit to share the good news of God’s grace and love.

For the Eastertide Sundays of the month of April, we looked to the Book of Acts and at its stories of the early church: how their testimony about God’s grace and love revealed in Jesus created a new community that acted for the common good: supporting one another, sharing what they had, and loving their neighbors in word and deed.

This Sunday and next, we turn to the first letter of Paul to the Christian church in Corinth. The Apostle writes to a community developing faith practices that will honor God and serve one another in Christ’s name. They are comprised of Jews and Greeks, both male and female, of the rich and poor.

What God is up to in? What is God doing in the church, in their neighborhood and in the lives of people within the fold of the congregation and in the lives of those beyond it? This will determine the ways they live together as the church.

Throughout this chapter and the next, Paul teaches on the topic of how to discern God’s work in activating various gifts of the Spirit and how to value one’s brothers and sisters in Christ across that variety.

Read I Corinthians 12:4-13

Writing to these Christians in the church of Corinth, Paul makes an appeal – in the very first chapter – “that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and purpose.” (v. 10) Paul has been hearing reports of quarrels among them; that some have claimed their gifts – such as the ability to speak in and interpret tongues – are superior; that their spiritual gifts – and thus, they themselves – are more important to the church than others.

Some of you might have modern-day experience with this particular gift; in Pentecostal churches today, it is not uncommon that – during worship gatherings – members, when “slain” by the Spirit, can be heard and seen to be speaking in tongues, also known as *glossolalia*, uttering seemingly incomprehensible words that are said to have come from God. Those with the gift of speaking, and the interpretation of this speaking, in tongues are given extra attention and a place of higher status; they are seen as having a special relationship and deeper connection with God.

Paul addresses this ancient division within the Corinthian church by offering them a radical new way to think of themselves as members of a body. Many philosophers and politicians of Paul’s era used this image of the body to reinforce the hierarchies of their society; those holding higher power or status claimed to be the head or heart or stomach of the body, while others – usually the poor, women, foreigners, and servants – were the hands and feet; placed in positions that would serve the interests of the broader body; whether social, political or religious.¹

Paul overturns this common use of the body imagery. In its place, he proposes that God intends for there to be, in the church, equality through diversity. There are varieties of gifts and activities, he says, but it is the same Spirit who provides them. These gifts, which include but are not limited to the coveted abilities of speaking in and interpreting tongues, are distributed among every member of the body and are all activated by the same Spirit.

Sometimes, of course, these gifts of the Spirit are put to good use; we see, in the church and beyond, how abilities are nurtured, and talents employed in service of the common good. We see this in the gifts of healing and teaching, in wisdom and for the working of miracles. Every congregation has its stories of having discerned what God is up to in their midst and activating gifts of the Spirit to address the needs of members and those in the wider community. Paul will offer, in the next chapter, his hymn of praise for the faith, hope, and love – love that is

¹ Brian Peterson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

patient and kind, not envious or boastful; love that never ends – which can be witnessed when Christians act as and in service to the body of Christ.

The verb that Paul employs in verse 11 to say that all gifts are allotted by the Spirit is the same one that Luke uses in his telling of the Parable of Prodigal Son, of the loving father who allots his inheritance to each of his two sons. One of them – the younger, we recall – takes the inheritance allotted to him and fritters it away, while the older brother dutifully stays to work on the family farm. When the prodigal son returns, willing to work for his father as a hired hand, he is welcomed back with open arms, while the older brother mopes with resentment. The father goes to the elder and reminds him that the inheritance, the allotment, had already been given; nothing had been withheld. Here the parable ends, and we are left to wonder how the dutiful, older son will respond.²

Thus, as Paul was hearing about the church in Corinth, sometimes the allotted gifts of the Spirit are not put to use for the common good; maybe they are frivolously wasted; or, at other times those who seem to be doing all the heavy lifting resent others that appear to get off easy. We humans tend to view gifts as our own; taking credit for inheritances that have been passed on to us by others. We often value difference when it benefits us, then devalue the variety among us when it fails to serve our own purposes.

Thus, one of the central messages of Paul’s teaching about the body is the celebration of diversity and difference. While some in the Corinthian congregation lifted up one spiritual gift, Paul illustrates that all gifts are worthwhile and inspired by the same Spirit that distributes and activates them – in all their variety.

So, *what might God be up to, today?* What is God is doing in the church, in this neighborhood and in the lives of people within the fold of the congregation and in the lives of those beyond it?

These are questions that every congregation – each body of Christ in its own time and context – must seek to answer for themselves. We are now living in a time when membership and participation in the life and worship of congregations is – generation-by-generation – declining. This is the era of the growing “nones;” that is, when people are asked with what faith tradition they affiliate – Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, or other – a rapidly increasing number of people, and a larger percentage in each succeeding generation, answer “none of the above.”

² Mary Hinkle Shore.

A myriad of reasons likely contribute to this trend. Among them, increased mobility, and dislocation; religious scars caused by rejection or discrimination; busier schedules and changing societal expectations; growing individualism and institutional distrust; or plain disinterest. This is not, of course, an exhaustive list.

Congregations are changing. Like Valley, many – especially in suburban settings – were founded in the 1950's and peaked in membership a generation-or-so later. Since then, not all but many have seen a decline in markers such as membership, influence, volunteer participation, and giving. Fewer people are choosing to enter professional ministry and the number of churches that can afford full-time leadership has declined. Church mergers, space-sharing and closings have followed.

It is fair – and necessary – to continue asking, *what is God up to?* By looking back to the church described in the New Testament, we are reminded that these early congregations faced controversies, divisions, and demographic changes. The natural tendency was to elevate some gifts – and those members who had been given them – as more important than others; to claim that these were the markers of faithfulness and the true church. Paul reminds us, instead, that the body of Christ is made of many members and that variety and difference were strengths, not a sign of weakness. When gifts were used to love and serve in and beyond the walls of the church, it was to be celebrated and not discouraged. When the allotted faith was expressed in diverse ways – even those that may appear prodigal – it was to be encouraged and not resented.

We are, likewise, called to discern the ways that God is at work in the church and beyond its walls, in all its variety. Baptized into this body of the church, we are challenged and called to be a new creation; to continually discover how the Spirit can activate the gifts we are each given to love God by loving our neighbors; to work together for the common good; to be united – in all our diversity – “in the same mind and purpose.” We – though many, while different – are one body. Thanks be to God. Amen.