

“For The Common Good”

1 Corinthians 12:4-13

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;
and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord;
and there are varieties of activities,
but it is the same God
who activates all of them in everyone.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit
for the common good.

To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom,
and to another the utterance of knowledge
according to the same Spirit,
to another faith by the same Spirit,
to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,
to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy,
to another the discernment of spirits,
to another various kinds of tongues,
to another the interpretation of tongues.

All these are activated by one and the same Spirit,
who allots to each one individually
just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members,
and all the members of the body, though many,
are one body, so it is with Christ.

For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body —
Jews or Greeks, slaves or free
—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

For The Common Good

1 Corinthians 12:4-13

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I.

Today is Pentecost, originally a Jewish Feast celebrating the grain harvest which occurred 50 days after Passover. In the Christian Calendar, Pentecost comes seven Sundays after Easter. Another name for Pentecost, for those residing in England and Ireland and for our Anglican and Methodist brothers and sisters all over the world, is Whitsunday which expanded the ecclesiastical occasion into a cultural event as well, with the week following given over to celebrations in the form of fetes, fairs, and pageants and was originally tied to agricultural rhythms which harken back to the original Jewish roots. Not unlike Canton's own Dairy Princess.

II.

Normally, on this day, the sermon text would be the story of the first Pentecost found in the second chapter of Acts. That wild image of a sudden rush of wind from heaven permeating the entire house. Tongues of fire resting on each person. Everyone being filled with the Holy Spirit. People watching, amazed and astonished, as every language was spoken. And the church being commissioned with the *responsibility*, and its people gifted with the *ability*, to speak God's deeds of power to all the world, in every possible tongue. Pentecost is, in essence, the church's "Spirit Sunday." The day when the third shoe dropped and the final person of the Trinity was introduced to the world and bestowed upon the church. Recognize, however, that the gift of the Holy Spirit did not *create* the church. Instead, it *equipped* the church.

III.

Today, though, I have decided to preach not from the Pentecost story in Acts, but from Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, where Paul articulates what are often called "the gifts of the spirit." Just as Paul fleshed out and elaborated on so many theological concepts grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, in today's text Paul expands on the role and function of the Spirit for, and within, the church.

Namely, that there are a variety of these spiritual gifts: the utterance of wisdom, the utterance of knowledge, faith, healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, the discernment of spirits, various kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. Each of these gifts, which is a manifestation of the Spirit, is first given by God, then activated by the Spirit solely for the purpose of the common good.

IV.

For me, the homiletical task, the purpose of the sermon, is to peel back the centuries of understanding and assumption regarding a particular passage or verse to just the bare bones, set the historical context out of which the text arose, and, then, juxtapose it our current reality. Sometimes this involves stepping way, way back for a larger perspective. Other times, though, just the opposite is called for, as we move in so close on a verse as to get ink on our noses. Today, I would like to do a little bit of both. First, let's step in.

V.

Like most of Paul's letters, I Corinthians is speaking to a specific church, at a specific time, and for a specific reason. Reading between the lines, it would seem that in this particular part of the letter Paul is addressing not only the *Spirit*, the *gifts* of the Spirit, and the *purpose* of those gifts but, perhaps more poignant, the diverse or uneven distribution of those gifts in and among the Corinthian congregation. Which, we can only assume, was causing no small amount of friction.

In many ways, Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to look beyond how they are spiritually differentiated and come to an understanding of one body composed of many parts. What I would like us to do, though, is move in the exact *opposite* direction, and look not at the body, but the parts. At *you* really, at *your* role in the church, at your *particular* gift, whatever that may be.

VI.

I truly believe it is, by definition, impossible to be a Christian without being a part of the body of Christ. Now, I am willing to grant some leeway as to how one *defines* the body of Christ. You can certainly find God on the golf course, mountain top, or the quiet places of our hearts, but *finding* God is different than *participating* in and with God. For that, really, one needs a faith

community. I am open to hear about other ways, but a good old-fashioned church is the simplest and most direct.

However, while the purpose of a church is pretty clear (or should be) the individual role each person plays *in* that purpose is often anything but evident. This is ok, though, because figuring out one's purpose within the body of Christ is where all the fun is at, it is what constitutes the journey, it is the point of the whole endeavor.

VII.

Faith will forever remain a mere mental concept until we actually put it to use. The the best place to put it to use is where our talents, interests and gifts lie. The truth of today's passage is that each of us, as individuals, have been given at least one form of the spiritual gifts. Regardless of we you know it or not, use it or not, or recognize it as such.

Now, I am sure many of you are sitting there saying, "Ok, Mr. Smartie Pants, which of us has been tasked with the interpretation of tongues?" Well, so you can get the drift of this whole spiritual gift thing, and by way of example, that would be Faye Bartley and Pat Mace.

VIII.

You might think that they are the church's Master Gardeners, but *I* see them as taking the often unintelligible utterances of the spirit of our church and expressing them in a form with is life-giving, beautiful, and profoundly understandable to anyone who is walking by. When you see that garden, you come to understand something about our congregation. Something which is good, something which is healing, something which is vibrant, something which is very real indeed.

Yet, each of you, in your own unique way do the very same kind of faith expression in the other areas of our church. Jeanne-Minette, HaEun and the members of the choir enact healing. CS Director Andrea utters knowledge, the children of our congregation utter wisdom, and, right now, Elders on Session are bringing the gift of faith to bear in interpreting the dreams of this church for its future. The truth is, all of you are working miracles even though you maybe unaware of the how and when. There is no doubt, though, as to the why.

IX.

Why we do *it*, why we do *anything*, why we do *everything* is, quite simply, for the common good as glorifying to Christ. Stepping way back now (*remember, I said I wanted to both step in and step out*) there seems to be a myth being perpetrated on us all that there is no real *value* in striving for the notion of a common good simply because there is no longer any good that we might hold in common across region, nation, political affiliation, social and economic stratification, or personal orientation. We have gerrymandered ourselves as separate and distinct for each other. As to this notion, we people of faith must vehemently and vigorously disagree.

Returning to Rosemary's Garden, Pat and Faye do not toil in the soil, sow the seeds, and bury the bulbs just so they *themselves*, as individual parts of the body, can walk by every day and see the wonder of God's creation. Instead, they do these things as a means of glorifying Christ, demonstrating leadership, and participating in the shared responsibility which we, as a congregation, have for our physical church, and for every person *in* our church. They also do so in order that our entire community might see and believe in the wonder of God's creation we hold the common, and the goodness which abides in all of us here at this church.

X.

Today, on Pentecost, we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit not in *creating* the body but in equipping, or gifting, the *parts* of the body to function, together, as the church. That such spiritual gifts would be diverse and distributed differently throughout the congregation is not a source of weakness or a cause for friction, but, rather, among our greatest strengths. The key, though, is having each person assume the responsibility from *moving* their particular faith from a mere concept to a specific, concrete, and real-life expression which arises out of their particular gift, activated in them by the Spirit, and, then, offered to the glory of God for the common good. Amen.