

## Many Gifts, One Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:1-11 *Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.*

Paul wants to say some words to the Christian community in Corinth about “spiritual gifts.” The word he uses here (*pneumatikon*) can also mean “spiritual persons,” or just “spiritual matters (J.B. Phillips).” Paul simply wants to introduce the subject of what it means to be a community guided and energized by God’s spirit. But I wondered: What if he means “spiritual persons”? Maybe Paul wants the Christians at Corinth to be more fully aware that they are persons who, because of their faith in and commitment to Jesus Christ, are living a new kind of life, a life shaped by God’s spirit. In other words, maybe Paul is saying something like: Don’t forget who you are as Christ’s community! Always remember that you are a people of God’s spirit!

Then I thought: Couldn’t this also mean that each person is a gift to the community, to the world? Whether Paul is expressly saying this or not, I think it is at the heart of what he’s talking about. Each one of us is a gift. Each one of us is uniquely made. Each one of us brings with us our own relationship with God, our own life as a channel of God’s spirit. Who we are is a gift, not just what we do. If we are a discerning community, then we will have and cultivate this way of looking at each other and ourselves.

Each person who finds his or her way to this community is a gift. Our work is to receive this gift of each person and allow that giftedness to be discovered and shared. We often say in our mission groups that each person who feels called to be part of that particular mission is there for a reason. The inward journey of the group is to discover the particular gift the person brings for the work of the mission. Before that, however, there needs to be an awareness that each person IS a gift to the group and the mission. With all of his or her strengths and weaknesses, wholeness and woundedness, each person in his or her entirety is a gift to the group.

What about those we have known and been around for a long time? Well, they, too, are gifts from God. The problem is that we have forgotten that. We’ve gotten so used to each other that we are under the illusion that we really KNOW this person. We don’t. The person we’ve sat across the breakfast table from for years or worshipped with every Sunday or been with through the thick and thin of the church’s life...every person is a mysterious, ever-changing, ever-unfolding gift from God.

Maybe the problem is that we lose a sense of ourselves as spiritual persons and gifts from God, this mystery of our own lives. Maybe we’ve gotten so used to and tired of our own familiar struggles and flaws and habits that we don’t see ourselves as God’s gifts to the world in any measure whatsoever. Maybe we’ve developed such a low view of ourselves that we think we have little to offer the world. Maybe we’ve gotten some perfection thing in our heads and have given up on ourselves because we never measure up to our own expectations. We can see how other people might be gifts from God to the world, but not us!

God’s love for us in Christ accepts and affirms us as God’s beloved people. God’s unconditional love envelops the whole of who we are, especially the parts of ourselves that we have despised or wanted to disown. Our life in Christ enables us to come to this fresh view of ourselves, to see the giftedness of our lives. This becomes real and obvious when in a mission group members share their spiritual lives with one another. We hear things about someone’s life and spiritual journey that we did not know before. They share with us their struggles, loves, challenges, dreams, pains. All of a sudden the person we thought we had pegged is a bright and shining mystery unfolding before our eyes. And when we are given the opportunity to share our spiritual lives, we become aware of how our lives give life to others, including and perhaps especially our struggles. It is in this community of sharing with one another the whole of our lives that our giftedness begins to shine forth. We see how our own life and the lives of others are indeed God’s gifts to the world.

Then Paul is ready to talk about spiritual gifts (*karismata*). Not only is each person a gift to the community and the world, but also each person brings at least one particular gift to be shared for the life and ministry of the community. It is the discovering, affirmation, and exercising of these gifts that enlivens the community and gives it direction for ministry. God’s call in our lives to serve the life of the world works through the gifts that God gives us. And the most effective and fulfilling way we can respond to God’s call is to discover and use the gifts God has implanted in us.

Paul says that there are varieties of gifts and there are varieties of service or ministry. Not sameness. Not uniformity. That was the problem he was addressing in the Corinthian community. There were little groups there that had divided up, centering themselves around a particular spiritual leader, in most cases, the person who had baptized them. This was not diversity but division. It was not unity but the desire for uniformity.

Some very familiar human tendencies were in the Corinthian community. The tendency to want to band together with folks who think like us, act like us, have the same way of seeing things as us. Out of our insecurities, of not really knowing and giving ourselves to our own sense of call and our own gifts, we want everyone else to conform to who we think we are or want to be. Our egos come into play and simply want others to be like us, even if we're not exactly sure who "us" is!

Paul is saying that God doesn't work that way. In fact, trying to make everyone the same, to consolidate people into the same ideological or spiritual mold, works against what God is trying to do for the world. Paul's insight is radical. God creates unity in this new community of Christ through diversity. Paul is saying that our unity in God through Christ issues in a diversity of gifts and ministries, not sameness. And when we try to make everyone the same, we block the life God is trying to bring to the world through us.

Now, diversity has become a suspect word in some circles. Certain folks—usually those who are white, male, affluent, and who want to hold onto power—have gotten very uptight about the word "diversity" and defensively call it "political correctness." When women or ethnic groups or minority peoples want to express who they are and what their experience is, there are those who want to dismiss them, who feel threatened. The world IS diverse, both in the human family and in nature itself. It is diversity that makes life possible at all and that gives life its flavor and richness.

Paul is simply saying that it is the same in the community of Christ. God works through the variety and diversity of persons and gifts and callings in the community of faith. When we are one in Christ, when we are aware of our unity in God and God's spirit, then our life together will be a tapestry of ministries being carried out through our particular gifts.

I am not going to take time this morning to go through the list of gifts and ministries that Paul mentions—wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, deeds of power, or miracles, prophetic vision, and so forth. Paul is simply noting some of the ministries and gifts that exist in the Corinthian community, and which may be important for any community of faith. But the list is neither exhaustive nor definitive. It is not as though Paul is saying: These are the gifts God has given to the church; make sure you have them in your community. No. There is no prescribed list of gifts that we must have. That would be contrary to the whole message of Paul. God's spirit causes to spring forth in the community diverse gifts that are needed by and unique to that community.

The point is to cultivate in ourselves a spiritual awareness of each other, of people, so that we see each person as a gift to us and the world from God. And beyond that, we perceive in each person something particular that they bring, some calling and gift emerging in them that can give life to the community itself and to the world. This has been the vision of our community here from the beginning. We try, not always with success, of course, to carry out our life and ministry on the basis of God's call in our lives and the gifts God has given us.

One last thing to mention. It has to do with the way our gifts are shared and to what purpose. Paul writes: To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. Manifestation (*phaneros*) here means something invisible that is made visible. The unseen spirit of God is made visible in our lives through the gifts God has given us, the chief gift being the gift of our selves. The measure of our gift is the common good of the community and the world. Is what we are offering and the way we offer it enriching the life of the community? Is it contributing to the love, peace, and compassion of our life together and our ministries? This is another thing to be aware of and to help each other with, the sharing of our lives and gifts in ways that are for the common good, that add to our life together in Christ. Paul will get to this a bit later, in the thirteenth chapter of his letter. For there he will talk about the supremacy of love as the greatest gift and attribute of the community and the members of it.

For today it is enough to be reminded through Paul's words that we are and are to continue to become a community of God's one spirit that creates a diversity of gifts and ministries. We touch again this vision and renew our commitment to being such a community. This means being honestly aware of our tendencies to want others to be like us, to think like us, to be committed to the same things as we are. And it means growing in our capacity to see and rejoice in the diversity that springs forth from God's one spirit.