

Community of the Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:1, 4-27

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

If there is a “golden text” for the Church of the Covenant, 1Corinthians 12 is it. The one spirit of God expressing itself through the giftedness of each person. Each person’s gift contributing to the common good. God’s spirit manifesting in a myriad of ministries and missions. Each gift essential to the community, none more important than others. Those assumed to be “weakest” are indispensable. Those deemed “less honorable”, whatever that might mean, are treated with honor. This is how our bodies work, says Paul. And this is how the community of Christ works.

When it came to providing a consistently invigorating image for our life together, Paul really nailed it! The Church of the Covenant has been working with these things for decades. This passage has become the foundation of the way we structure our life and ministries. We have not borrowed our structure from the corporate world—committees, a board, task groups, a pyramid of authority, and so forth. We have tried to let ourselves be shaped by this vision of Jesus’ community as a living organism drawing its life directly from God’s spirit. So, it is always good to revisit this passage.

Gifts. Paul uses the word *karismata*, from which we get charismatic. It’s based on the word *karis*, meaning “gift” or “grace,” God’s grace. Every person herself or himself is a gift of God to the world and to the community of faith. That’s the starting point. We come from God as those created good, pronounced good. We get lost, to be sure. We become full of hurts and distractions. We get programmed by our culture and even religion itself in ways that cause us to lose touch with who we really and truly are—God’s beloved daughters and sons. But we remain, deep in the core of our being, gifts that God has given to the world and to the community of faith. Much of our inward journey work is to reconnect with our true self, with our own giftedness that comes from God.

Also, each of us has at least one particular gift to be shared for the enriching of life around us, in the community of faith itself and in the world. The gifts are as manifold and particular as we are as persons. We think of obvious ones—abilities in music, speaking, writing, handiwork, finances, administration, and so forth. But there are also subtler, yet no less profound gifts that become apparent as we really get to know each other and how our lives are mutually enriched. Gifts of listening, understanding, insight, wisdom, or honesty that helps us to face difficult things about ourselves.

How do we discern our own and others’ gifts? Perhaps by asking questions: What is it that I love to do, that gives life to me as I do it and seems to give life to others as well? Is there some woundedness in me that makes me sensitive to some need in the world around me? Our wounds and struggles are also gifts to be discerned, understood, and shared. What is it about this other person that is essential to my life and our life together? If this person were not here, what would be missing in my or our life? This includes the person who causes us to struggle. When we are having trouble with someone, this may indicate that there is something in us that we need to look at and understand. Why am I defensive? Why am I angry? What am I afraid of? The kind of love Jesus said we are to have for one another does not let us get away with loving only those who are pleasing to us. If we are looking for a community of people just like us, without differences or conflicts, we are in for a load of suffering, for it does not exist. Community happens for us when we finally put down and begin learning the love that changes us and the world.

Each of us, particularly those working in mission groups, needs to stay in touch regularly and attentively with this thing of discerning and calling forth and using gifts. When we neglect this spiritual work of who God made us to be and what God has given us to share with the world, then we close off one of the major channels of God’s spirit into the world.

Ministries. Or as Paul puts it, services and activities. This is what God wants to do and is doing through us to nourish, enrich, and deepen the life of our community of faith and the world around us. This is the outward expression of our spiritual life as individuals and mission groups. The exercising of our gift is in itself an outward ministry, a service to life. Being the gift of who we are is in itself a service to the world and the community. I think this is a difficult one for us to hold onto and believe in. There are so many urgent needs in our world pressing for response. We may wonder sometimes if maybe this preoccupation with persons and gifts is not a bit self-absorbed. But this is only the case if we don't believe that God knows what God is doing! There is nothing more powerful and effective in meeting some need in the world than a person or small group of persons who feel themselves called and gifted to meet that need. If we are not called to respond to a particular need, as hard as we may force ourselves in that direction, we will not bring much light or power. If we are living out of call and gift, however, we will be a clearer channel of God's energy, power, and life, and have the time of our life!

Paul believes that this is the way God works to meet the needs of both the community of faith and the world itself. God will call persons to meet the needs and challenges of the life of God's world. If we are seriously and attentively working with gifts and call, and encouraging others to do the same, we are putting ourselves within the stream and flow of God's spirit and power. Not everyone is called to be a Martin Luther King, Jr., or a Mother Theresa. In fact, each of us is called not to be like anyone but to be ourselves as God created us—a gift to life with gifts to share. We are not doing the world any good as long as we are trying to be someone we are not and doing things we are not deeply called to do.

Paul uses the image of the body to describe how God works within the community. This organic way of viewing our life together reflects what we observe in the creation itself. The human community, as God made us to experience it, works the same way as the creation, the universe itself. Everything in creation has its place and contributes from its "place" to the whole. The rock, the tree, the cloud, the flower, the insect, the bird. Birth, life, death. Decay and growth. This is why the extinction of species is far more serious than our not having a particular creature around anymore to enjoy. When a piece of the creation disappears because of our negligence or outright violence against it, something is disturbed in the very fabric of the creation. The balance is upset, and the effects are far more subtle and far-reaching than we perceive from our limited and self-centered human vantage point. It is the same within the human community living together in God's love, conscious of that love and letting that love shape its life. Each person, each gift, each ministry or calling has its essential place.

The last thing Paul says is that there can be no judgment and comparison. One part cannot say to the other, "You are not important; you don't belong." One part cannot conceive itself to be more important than the others, expecting them to be like it. No one person or gift is more or less important than the others. All are needed. All have their essential place. And no ministry or mission can claim to be more important than the others. In this milieu of gifts, ministries, and the working of God's spirit, we have to drop our judgments, our measuring, any sense of competition and ego. The eye must keep being the eye, the ear the ear, the foot the foot, and so forth.

This is work for our inward journeys. Each of us who is involved in some ministry or mission feels called to it. With call comes a deep passion for what we are involved in. And with passionate commitment often comes the feeling that everyone else should be concerned with what we are doing and should get on board with us. But there is a difference between being mindful and supportive of one another, and being imperialistic about "our thing." We each must admit that we have a little dictator in us that wants to tell others how they should be living and what they should be concerned about. What Paul is describing calls for us to grow in awareness of each other, be appreciative of each other, and celebrate the reality that God is doing a variety of things for our community and the wider world through us. This means exercising self-discipline when it comes to being aware of how we sometimes act and speak in ways that diminish what others are doing or make assumptions that what we are called to is more important than what others are called to.

Awareness of community is a wonderful blessing! It is sort of a spiritual peripheral vision. When we become more conscious of the persons and ministries that are part of our life together, while affirming and embracing our own “place,” our own gift and calling, our awareness of the presence of God’s spirit deepens and becomes more vivid. It is not something to be controlled or manipulated or “managed”. At times it may feel a bit like chaos! The other day I found myself thinking of the things going on in and among us, the struggles and challenges faced by different persons and missions. I felt that old impulse to fix or control things rising up in me. Thank God I have progressed enough in my spiritual life to know when this is happening and immediately begin to practice letting go. For some reason, I thought about “chaos theory.” Some scientists these days talk about “chaos theory,” the observation that life is not neatly ordered, progressing along predictable lines toward predictable outcomes. There is far more randomness and novelty to the life process than we are aware of. I thought how our life together feels at times a lot like chaos. It is the way life “feels” when we remain open to the mystery and work of God’s spirit. With this thought there also arose in me a deep sense of gratitude for being part of a community willing and working to be open to the one spirit of God that is known in a splendid variety and diversity of life and callings and gifts.