

January 20, 2013 / Second Sunday after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

One Spirit, Many Callings and Gifts

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

First Corinthians 12 is the “golden text” of our community. It is our vision, our “constitution”, and our spiritual work all rolled into one! It is about our unity being the spirit that expresses itself through us in a diversity of callings and gifts. Diversity is the nature of reality, the way the universe is made and how it works. Uniformity is something we try to impose on reality, and it always diminishes life. When Paul used the human body as an image for the spiritual community, he wasn't simply employing a clever analogy. He understood, consciously or otherwise, how the whole of creation is organized and functions. It is organic, dynamic...diverse! And our life as a community also must manifest this nature of reality as diverse and organic.

Paul wants to speak to the community in Corinth about “spiritual gifts.” The word he uses (*pneumatikon*) can mean “spiritual persons.” We are spiritual persons. Paul wants the Christians at Corinth to remember and wake up to the reality that they are persons who are called, gifted, and given a diversity of activities or ministries, all flowing from and energized by God's spirit.

First, each person is a gift to the community, to the world. I think this underlies everything Paul is saying. Each one of us is a gift. Each one of us is uniquely made. We each have our own relationship with God, so that our life is a unique channel of God's spirit. We must always remember that who we are is a gift, not just what we do. We are called to be a community that discerns and cultivates this way of looking at each other and ourselves. So many feel so badly about themselves for so many reasons, and so many are caught up in judging and hating others, creating a climate of hostility and fear. The word that each person is a gift from God to the world is water in the desert and light in the darkness.

Simply put, the spiritual life is, I think, paying attention and seeing deeply. That is how we preserve this precious vision of others and ourselves as gifts. This is why it is so important that we take time daily for our inward journey. It is why we share our lives with one another, as in mission groups when we share our life stories and report on how we are doing with our spiritual lives. Or when we make our commitment to membership, sharing with the community something of our spiritual journey. Sharing our lives with one another at this

deeper level quickens the energy of life and reawakens us to the spirit of God working in our lives. We touch our giftedness and that of others. As a hymn that we sing says, “We are each other’s bread and wine” (*What Is This Place*, #289 Chalice Hymnal)

Second, Paul talks about spiritual gifts and callings. 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. Discovering, affirming, and exercising these gifts is how we open up the channels for God’s love and spirit to flow in and through us. The word Paul uses for these kinds of gifts (*karismata*) is the same word he uses to describe the gift (*karis*) nature of God’s love. We could say that our gifts are manifestations of God in and through us. The degree to which we claim and use our gifts, whatever they are, has to do with the degree to which God’s spirit and love are able to express through us.

Paul says that there are varieties of gifts and callings and workings of the spirit. Not sameness. Not uniformity. That was the problem in the Corinthian community. Little groups had divided up around a particular spiritual leader, perhaps the person who had baptized them. Each group felt its way was THE way, its truth was THE truth. This was not diversity but division. It was not unity but the desire for uniformity that kills the spirit and fosters animosity.

These are familiar human tendencies. Banding together with those who think and act like us, who have the same way of seeing things. Thinking our own way or commitment or mission is most important. Our egos are at work, demanding that life conform to how we think things should be. Whether it is out of insecurity, arrogance, or simply our lack of awareness, the demand for uniformity destroys community and makes it impossible for God’s spirit to work in and through us. After all, Paul is saying, it is not what WE do that is most important, but what God does THROUGH us as we respond to our unique callings and gifts.

Paul mentions several such gifts and callings and ministries—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 existed in the Corinthian community. Paul is not saying: These are the gifts God has given to the church; make sure you have them in your community. No. That would be contrary to everything Paul has said. God’s spirit causes to spring forth in us as a community diverse gifts that are needed by and unique to our community. The gifts God has given to our community are right here now, in each and all of us, being exercised now or waiting to be discovered and used.

Then Paul writes: To each is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good. Manifestation (*phaneros*) means something invisible that is made visible. The unseen

spirit of God is made visible through the gifts God has given us. What an astounding thing! God's spirit is made visible in you and in me, the very gift of our lives, and the many gifts that we bring. These gifts contribute to 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? By withholding our gift, for whatever reason—fear, false humility, feelings that our gift is too small or unimportant—are we diminishing the common good of our community? The spiritual health and vitality of our community is related to whether or not we keep our focus on the work of identifying, exercising, celebrating, and sharing our lives, our gifts, and our callings.

In the second part of our reading, Paul expands on the matter of how we regard and act toward each other within the community. And it must be out of the wisdom that our life as a community is vital and effective only insofar as we recognize, celebrate, encourage, and respect the diversity of persons, gifts, callings, and ministries that are given us by God's spirit.

Simply put, no gift is greater than another. No gift is more important than another, none too small or dispensable. If every person, every gift, is essential, then we each need to identify, with the help of others, what it is we are called and gifted to do as an expression of God's spirit and love. That is the pearl of great price to be discovered, and, as in the parable, we must sell everything in order to buy it. Knowing our own giftedness and what we are called to be and do is essential to the life of the community and the world. Staying focused on our call and gifts will need the discipline of our spiritual lives. We will need to learn to say no to those things that would distract us and our energies from the life to which we feel God has called us. And we will, as a community, need to help each other with this struggle of remaining focused on our callings and gifts.

This is the reason I told the Covenant Members that I needed a three month period of time to focus on the things to which I feel most deeply called - preparing our worship, working with music, both for our worship and my own music writing, having time for reflection and contemplation related to my own life and our life as a community. We all need to be working with these things all the time, encouraging one another to examine, evaluate, and modify our lives so that we are giving more and more to being who God made us to be and doing the things God gives us to do.

We also need to be aware of the ways we devalue our own lives, gifts, and callings. And we need to be humble enough to recognize the ways we devalue others and their callings and gifts. This means dropping our habits of judging and measuring. When the very nature of

life is diversity, that means that each thing, each person, each activity, each gift or calling, is essential to the working of the whole. When I am diminishing the importance of my own life, with its callings and gifts, I am not giving to the community and to the world what God has created me to give, and not experiencing the joy that comes from such a way of life. It is critical to the community, and the world itself, that we be good stewards of our own gifts. When we abandon the gift of our own lives and gifts, trying to be someone else or doing something we think more important and that is not ours, we abandon the unique place God has given us to dwell in and to tend.

In Numbers 16 there is a story that has profound meaning. Elaine Marie Prevallet of the Sisters of Loretto brings this to our awareness in her little book INTERCONNECTIONS. Korah is a Levite serving at the tabernacle, but not within the tabernacle itself. He begins to covet the role of Aaron, who enters the sanctuary itself. Korah challenges Moses and Aaron, and Moses calls on God to judge the matter. God's response is to split open the earth so that it swallows Korah and his family. We may not like that particular picture of God, but the story has something to teach. A Hasidic tale tells of a disciple who asked a certain rabbi what caused Korah to rebel against Moses and Aaron. The rabbi replied that Korah noticed how, when he stood up above, among the singing Levites, great gifts of the spirit came to him. He thought that if he stood even higher, in the place of Aaron, within the tabernacle itself, even greater gifts would come to him. He did not understand that the power he had felt came upon him because Aaron stood in his place and Korah in his.

Elaine Prevallet writes: "Like Korah, we are unaware of this deeper interconnectedness in life...each one's fidelity to her or his gift enables the operation of someone else's gift." You see, discovering, claiming, nurturing, and exercising the gift of our lives, of who we are, and whatever gifts we discover are ours--this is how we participate in the whole process of life. The common good of the community and indeed of the creation itself is served as we stand or dwell in our own place, our own life, our own gifts.

Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 12 bring us back to who we are as a community, the vision out of which we were born, and the work of our spiritual lives. We need to touch again and again this vision, grow in deeper understanding of it, and renew our commitment to being such a community.