

January 17, 2016 / Second Sunday after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

Spirit and Diversity—That's How It Works!

Isaiah 62:1-5 *You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.*

Psalms 36:5-10 *For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.*

1 Corinthians 12:1, 4-11 *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

Our reading from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth is the “golden text” for our community. It comprises the call and vision of the Church of the Covenant. We are to be a community always in the process of knowing our own and each other's' giftedness, and discerning what God is calling each one to be and to do as an expression of God's love for the world. The inward journey and outward journey we talk about and work with are the path of prayer and service, of growing in awareness of our lives in God and being about whatever we feel most deeply called to do in the service of life.

When Paul writes about gifts and services and callings, the underlying assumption is that each person IS a gift. Our very life is a gift. Simply who we are is a gift. One of the basic beliefs of our community is that each person is a gift to the community and to the world. That is not the way we usually think. We think we have to be something else, or something more. We think we have to become something or attain something or perfect ourselves in some way. Not so. The foundation of our life as human beings is the love that pervades the universe, that simply gives us life as a gift. We speak of it as God's grace, God's unconditional love, which we cannot, nor do we need to, earn. It is simply there. We already are God's gift to the world. The word Paul uses is *karis*, which means gift, but also kindness or blessing. So each and every one of us is a gift, a kindness, a blessing to the world. That is the truth this community tries to live into and out of.

Our work is to help one another recover this understanding of who we really are. We knew it instinctively as young children. As we grew up, however, various influences and experiences—family, society, religion, education—put into us the destructive notion that we have to be something other than we are, that we are insufficient, that we have to change into some ideal that others hold up for us—successful, beautiful, achieving, powerful, strong, even

“spiritual”. Our spiritual work is to remind ourselves and one another that we are a gift to the world and to this community AS WE ARE. Our truest, deepest, nature is the essential goodness of our lives as God made us. What needs to be undone, healed, let go of is all that “stuff” that keeps telling us in our heads and hearts that we are not lovable, competent, or good enough. That is spiritual work of our inward journey and with which others help us as we share with them, for instance, in our accountability reports in our mission groups. In fact, that might be a good question to add to our self-reflection and assessment: How am I doing with really knowing myself, my life, as a gift, a blessing, a kindness, to the world?

Our essential giftedness is the underlying assumption of Paul's words about varieties of gifts. The gifts, the ministries or activities, flow out of who we are as those loved unconditionally by God. What we DO flows from WHO WE ARE. We do not do in order to be loved. We do because we are loved and therefore loving. The very idea of our being loved unconditionally by God and then turning right around and promoting hate or violence, fear or judgmentalism is anathema to our scriptures and our spiritual tradition. The ways we live, the gifts we are given to share, the callings of God we feel in our hearts to give to the world in some particular way—these are manifestations, as Paul says, of God's spirit, which is loving, reconciling, healing, peaceful.

God's spirit works in diversity, not uniformity, differences, not sameness. Religious extremism these days is trying to make everyone uniform, think the same, be the same. Some are, in the name of Christianity, seeking to bind people together with cords of hate, fear, and anger toward our brothers and sisters who are not of our race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, or spiritual tradition. Paul says, here and elsewhere, the complete opposite. Life is diversity, not uniformity. Difference is the nature and essence of life, not sameness. It is interesting to note that when the word “diversity” began to be used widely, some became defensive, seeing it as some kind of subversive idea being imposed upon us. Well, diversity is the nature of life. It is the nature of the creation. It is diversity that sustains everything, that keeps it all going. Our destruction of species of animal and plant life in our insane human quest for “progress” and prosperity adversely affects the whole of nature. Diversity is the nature of human life. Different races, cultures, peoples, spiritual traditions. When one race or culture or religion demands that others conform to it, the result is violence and death all around.

Paul knows that diversity is also the essence of the spiritual community, the community

of Jesus. It thrives on diversity of gifts, the gift of each person, and the particular gifts that each one brings. That is what shapes the life and work of the community. We are a church that does not operate by committees. We do not sit down and say, “We have to do these things” and then form committees around them. We operate on the basis of calling and gifts. What are you called to do, to give to the community itself or world? What is your deepest desire to touch the life of other people or the world with love or healing? What does your sense of God's love for you give rise to in terms of loving others in some specific activity or work or way? Paul lists some gifts and ministries he saw in his day. His list is not a checklist for us today, nor is the the complete list of all the gifts that God bestows. The gifts of our community here are the ones that each of us brings, the ones God has instilled in each of us to share with the world.

Our work as a community is to help one another claim our lives as those loved unconditionally and eternally by God. That is “the person as gift”. Then our work is to identify in ourselves and others the gifts we have to share. What is it about this person that gives life to our community, something that we would miss if she or he were not here? In our community, when we make a commitment to membership, we are choosing a way of life based on gifts and callings. And we are to grow in our capacity to see one another through the lens of gift and calling.

As I was working with this text, one word stood out for me in a powerful way. It is in verse 7: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” The Greek word translated “manifestation” is from the root verb *phaino*, which means to shine or to give light. It struck me that all this business of knowing ourselves as a gift, our life as gift, and sensing what we feel called by God to do for others and for the world, using the gifts that God has given us...all of the things that are part of the vision and life of this community have the effect of generating light. Light within us. Light in each of us. Light together as a community. It is the light spoken of in the reading from Isaiah, where God says to the people, “You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.” It is the image of a crown or tiara clustered with jewels, sparkling with light and color. Or these words from Psalm 36: “For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.” I thought of how the inward journey—prayer, inward quietness, study, listening, growing in understanding and awareness—is about opening our inner vision so that we see the light that is there, all around us and in us, because we are awakening to the light that is God. As our lives awaken more and more to our relationship with God, we begin to see light all around us, for we begin to see everything and

everyone, including ourselves, in God. And that is what Paul is saying. Each one is enlightened, or lit up, by God's spirit, which brings light to the whole community. I can say from many years of working with this stuff that when a person begins to come alive, to wake up to, her or his life in God, in a real way, you can see the light in them.

Jesus talked this same way. In the Sermon on the Mount he told the people, and his words speak to us: "You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God." (Matt. 5:14, 16) You already ARE light. Become aware of it. Then let your light shine! Last week we heard the words from the Gospel of John, about Jesus being the light coming into the world, the light of God's word being embodied in a human being like us. Jesus then shows and enables us to embody that light, that word, as well. It is our true humanity, as we live out of our relationship with the sacred source of all life, which we call God.

The change that we are in as a community is difficult. We may feel as though the light is dimming, or worse, going out. We have formed deep bonds with one another. The pain of separation is that we are letting go, in one way, of those bonds. For us as a spiritual community, however, this is an important, even necessary process. As painful as it can be, it teaches us where the Light truly is. Through this time of change, it is important that we make time in our inward journey for quieting ourselves and going back to our original calling and vision. We may realize that we have come to think that our own light has its origin, its source, in this other person, or persons, from whom I am being separated. We come back to our inward journey, however, and remember that the Light is always within us, the Light that is God—within me, around me, the everywhere present Light of life.

To each and everyone one of us is given the shining forth, or manifestation, of the Light, the Spirit. It is who we are as a gift from God to the world and to the community of faith. It is known in the particular callings and gifts implanted in each of us by God, the diverse ways God's spirit lives and moves in each one of us for the good of all. That is our calling as a community. That is our work. There is so much light in you, in this community and this place. As long as we keep coming back to our calling and vision, there will always be plenty of light right here, right now. And, as the Gospel of John says, "That light shines on, and the darkness has not (and never will) overcome it."