

## A New Way of Being Community

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1 Corinthians 12: 3-13

Paul wrote his letter, trying to help them understand. See, long before 1 Corinthians was a book in the New Testament, it was a letter, of course. It was a letter from a missionary to a church way out on the frontier, from the church's founder. Paul was that missionary and the church in Corinth, unlike the church in Jerusalem didn't have the tradition and the scriptures of Judaism to guide and support them. They didn't have the common God and the common background out of which this Jesus, who'd been proclaimed to them, had himself come. All they had were some traveling preachers, some evangelists who'd passed through their area. And that was just it, they'd passed through.

No, their background was pagan, and so they were having experiences in the church for which they had no texts and no precedents to help them. All they really knew was that the preaching of Jesus Christ and him crucified contained within it the promise of their inclusion in the people of the one God above all gods. That, and they knew that they had been baptized into a new community that was to live as and be that people. What they seemed to be missing was *how* to be that people. What they seemed to be missing was that what they were now a part of was to be a whole new *way* of being a community. See, there were divisions everywhere among them. And I guess, some of them at least, were sensing that all those divisions were making it hard to be a community that could live together with each other.

So, they'd written to Paul for some answers. 1 Corinthians was his letter of response to their letter. They had questions about marriage, divorce, litigation, support of local shrines, what foods were permissible to eat, the leadership of women, order of worship and communion, and the nature of the resurrected body. I mean the divisions were everywhere! And then in the section we read this morning, they had questions about the Spirit. Specifically, it seems they wanted to know what really made a person "spiritual," you know, in a Christian sense? Some thought it had to do with being very wise, having a deep understanding of things. And some thought it had to do with how much knowledge one possessed, how well-educated you were, you know having knowledge about things that just regular people didn't have. Some thought it was about faith, about possessing this unshakable trust in God, just knowing that you know that you know, that gets you through all things.

Some thought it was about being able to heal people, or to work miracles. Others thought it was about discerning between spirits. And still others thought you weren't *really* spiritual until you could speak in tongues. Now the thing is, those were all things that they'd experienced before in their pagan religions. They knew about wisdom and secret knowledge, and they'd experienced healers and miracle workers. And, as for tongues, ecstatic speech had been known and practiced for generations in various pagan religions. So, the divisions in the church reflected the divisions already there in the culture. And that's just on what it means to be spiritual.

All those other divisions they question Paul about reflect cultural divisions already there between poor and rich, master and slave, men and women, Jewish versus pagan religion. You know, the questions about marriage and divorce, and about shrines and proper foods, the questions about how to observe the Lord's supper come out of those divisions within the culture and between cultures. So, the divisions were everywhere in the church, too. Somehow, it sounds very familiar. The divisions in the church today reflect the divisions in the culture, or the divisions between cultures. And many of them are the same as in Corinth.

We have denominations and churches within the same denomination that often to great degree divide along socio-economic lines. We have them dividing along racial lines. We have them dividing along liberal or conservative lines. We have them still dividing along some of the

same lines about what it means to be truly “spiritual.” Some say it's about being able to quote chapter and verse, others it's about really understanding the background and context of scripture. Some say it's about speaking in tongues. Some say it's about doing miraculous things in the inner city neighborhoods. And, of course, we have other divisions that reflect the divisions in the culture. We disagree about abortion. We disagree about the standing of homosexual persons in the church, or in the pulpit. We disagree about war. We disagree about global warming. We disagree about how to interpret the Bible. All from people on both sides of any division, who are members of the church and who take their faith very seriously.

So, is it possible to get beyond our divisions and our fears? They are everywhere and the church seems to just reflect what they are across the culture. Listen. It's Pentecost, the celebration of the birth of the church and if we hear Paul's response to the Corinthians, one thing rings out. In Christ, God is making possible a completely new way of being community. And it's centered in what it means to be baptized into Jesus Christ. Says Paul, “no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let *Jesus* be cursed!’” Now, he's writing to a church. It's highly unlikely that anyone in the *church* is going around *saying* “Let Jesus be cursed!” He's not castigating the habit of using Christ's name in vain, or cursing Jesus with words as being evidence of the Spirit's absence, any more than he is holding up the practice of singing “He is Lord” over and over and over again as evidence of the Spirit's presence.

He's talking about behaviors with each other. He's saying it's entirely possible to “curse” Jesus by what we do and think, even when we think we are acting and speaking by the inspiration of the Spirit. And conversely, when you see someone living with others as if this Jesus really is Lord, then no matter what else is being said about that person, the Holy Spirit is at work in them. So, Paul has no interest in denying what he and others call gifts of the Spirit, no matter whether they are things that were and are practiced in their pagan religions or not. What Paul wants to call attention to is the nature of the Spirit, the nature of the God, the nature of Christ who is giver of all these gifts. What matters for Paul is with all this amazing diversity of gifts, they can all be affirmed as being of the Spirit *if* they serve the common good, which he construes as mutual love and respect and dignity and friendship between all.

For Paul they are to look for the life of Jesus being lived out and that's a life of compassion and forgiveness and acceptance that breaks through all the cultural barriers, because as he says: that is the body into which we were all baptized -- “Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” Says Paul we are all Christ's body (that's what the church *is!*) and we are *not* all the *same*, but we have all been given gifts by God to be used for the sake of mutuality and compassion, and forgiveness and friendship to raise the hopes of all, to raise the trust of all in a God who values and believes in them. And that's what the whole of the following chapter, the great “love chapter” 1 Corinthians 13 is all about, isn't it? All these great gifts of the spirit mean nothing, and certainly don't mean that a person is spiritual or Christian, if they don't result in love, if they don't result in mutuality and friendship that values the least respectable members' gifts and dignity even more than it values the most respectable folks.

So friends, today... Pentecost...Mothers' Day that is what we celebrate. Just as surely as we celebrate the ideal of a mother's love and it's reality as we have known it, despite all the ways our mothers miss the mark, we celebrate our *call* as Christ's church, and the reality of what the Spirit is still doing among us and through us, despite all evidence to the contrary. And there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. We know that. But, even so, maybe you've seen it, maybe you've experienced this new way of being in community called church here and there and now and then.

I know I experienced it in a new way when I first went to Seminary. Time was when I would be uncomfortable even being around a person who was homosexual. But, that began to change the first time I ever heard Charles Rice preach. And that happened my first week at Drew

Seminary, at a chapel service. So gifted a preacher is this gay man, so powerful a sermon, so powerful a witness for Christ, that that one sermon completely re-formed my thinking about what could happen in preaching. What a gift he's been given by God for the sake of Christ's church. That was a powerful experience of church for me, a powerful experience of this new way of being community with one another that we have been called to. "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." May it be so for us.

Happy Pentecost.