

Work of the Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

January 16, 2022

First Presbyterian, Luling

It seems that the Corinthians were having some kerfuffles over whose spiritual gift was more important, whose was bigger, who had more, who should get more recognition. They had decided which things counted as spiritual gifts and which didn't. You know, they were being competitive instead of cooperative, wanting to classify and rank things.

Throughout the letter, Paul is urging the Corinthian Christians to unity rather than division. It's clear that this kerfuffle over spiritual gifts has not led them in the direction of unity, and Paul is more than prepared to address the subject.

First off, the whole point of having gifts is not that you deserve them or created them yourself. They're from the Spirit.

And then he turns to the distribution of the gifts among the community of faith. Where our translation reads "varieties," it's the same word that's used in the parable of the Prodigal Son, where Jesus says the father divided or distributed his estate between the two sons. So it's not just that people have different gifts, but that God is in charge of dividing them up among everyone. It isn't arbitrary, like dealing out cards for a game of Uno. God distributes the different kinds of gifts for the common good.

Which means the gifts are to be used for the common good, to the advantage of everyone. Paul implies that the Corinthians are not using their gifts in this way, which in turn implies that they're using them for their own advantage. To raise their status in the community. Maybe in financially corrupt ways. Maybe to manipulate other people. Maybe just to make themselves feel better by putting someone else's gifts down. There's any number of ways we can use spiritual gifts for our own benefit instead of for the common good.

While I'm fairly certain Paul was using "the common good" to refer to the church community, I think it's a faithful reading to extend that to the whole community. What is a good use of gifts within the church community is, in turn, also for the good of the whole community.

The more I have come to identify and accept my own gifts, the more easily I have been able to value the gifts of others. Let me expand that a bit. The more we accept our own gifts, the more secure we become in the ways we are gifted,

the more clearly we can see where we are lacking. And if we can accept that this is not a failure on our parts, but simply gifts we don't have, gifts that God has given to someone else, then it's easy to see that we need other people and the gifts they have. And when we can value others' gifts, then we can work together for the common good.

One of our children is gifted at seeing more options than I can see. This can be maddening at times. Would you like to take a bath first, or clean up your toys first? She would come up with a third, fourth, fifth option instead. But I see that same gift in someone I work with on a committee. All I could see was that our retreat was going to have to be all in person or all online, because the place where we were going to hold the retreat didn't have internet capabilities. He identified the third option: why not just move the retreat to a different location, so that some people can come in person and some online? You know, just like we are doing right here today, but for some reason I couldn't imagine it in the context of this retreat. I needed his gifts, and together we made a better decision. Hopefully our daughter will grow up to use that gift for the common good, too.

The other daughter has a gift of accepting people just as they are, and being concerned for anyone and everyone. If I mention that there was a bunch of traffic because there was an accident, and I'm truly only relating the story because I'm complaining about how long it took me to get somewhere; she will—unfailingly, every time—ask if anyone was hurt. Oh. I need that gift, because I forget there were real people involved in that accident. Her gift is good for me, and naming the value of each person is a clear benefit to the common good.

If we aren't using our gifts for the common good—the whole common good, then we aren't honoring the gift or the giver. If some people are hurt by the ways we use our gifts, or if some people are excluded by the way we use our gifts, then we aren't being faithful. If we aren't allowing others to use their gifts for the common good, then that's not faithful either. Some of all of that was happening at Corinth.

It happens in our communities too. On this weekend when we remember and honor the Rev Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., we have to remember too, that a whole bunch of people and churches were—and still are--using their gifts to work against the dream of a beloved community, were working to limit the expression of his considerable gifts. On this weekend where we have prayed and watched and listened in horror as our Jewish neighbors suffer fear and terror once again, it's clear that we aren't all using our gifts for the common good, for the good of the whole community.

Paul is going to get to this, in chapter 13, but it's actually pretty easy to tell if we're using gifts for the common good, and here's the test: does the way we use our gifts express Christ's love? The greatest gift is love, and if our gifts are working against the common good, then they're working against love. The work of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit are love for everyone.