

The Priesthood of All Believers

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I Corinthians 12:1-11

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I often think that the first century church and the twenty-first church share many things in common. Not every thing, of course, but some important things.

The first century church was never established, but was seeking to find its way in a culture and environment that was either hostile or indifferent. The twenty-first century church, at least in North America, has been established, but is less so now. And though our culture is not hostile to us – and certainly not in the ways that some claim – it is often indifferent, and so we are seeking to find our way again, to navigate new waters, or to navigate old waters in new ways.

So I pay attention, and perhaps we should do as well, when we read Paul's letters to the earliest church. They read more than a little bit like letters that could have been written this morning, to us. Not verbatim. Paul says some things about some things about which we might have a disagreement, but that would be true if the letters *were* written this morning. Christians now do not agree on everything. Presbyterians don't. Perhaps you don't even agree on everything with the person on either side of the pew from you today. That's OK. In fact it's probably even good, not just on controversial social issues but on other ones as well. If we all agreed on everything, it would be kind of boring, first of all, and more important than that, it would not allow for growth and development.

Even so, to read Paul's letters to our predecessors is to read letters to us, because Paul focuses in on two prime messages – to encourage us when we are struggling and to correct us – sometimes gently, sometimes more severely – when we are divided.

And so this morning, and in the two Sundays to follow, we will experience Paul at his best and most iconic, doing both. He lifts us up, encourages us, cheers us onward as we navigate our life together and the cultural waters in which we find ourselves. And he corrects us, gently this time, mostly, when we find ourselves at odds with one another.

First Corinthians, it is called. "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters," Paul writes, "that all of you be in agreement and that there be no division among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose." Then Paul reminds those earliest Christians that it is God working in them, and not the

other way around, that allows all of this to happen, that empowers the church in its mission. He acknowledges the divisions, conflict and controversy – there must have been disagreements about sex and marriage, about food, about money. Shocking!

We could wrestle with the specifics here, or at least I would, but I would not wrestle about the overarching vision. “I want you to be free from anxiety,” Paul assures the church, “to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.” On some things Paul is very clear, or at least seemingly so. On other things, not so much. But his clarity on particular matters never gets in the way of his call to peace and unity within the body, and the persistent drumbeat that this is Christ’s Church, and not Paul’s church, and certainly not our church.

So he lays it out for us today, concerning spiritual gifts. It was, and remains, a remarkable testimony. He makes a case, a counter-cultural case. It is less about us and more about the Holy Spirit, which makes us nervous because the Holy Spirit makes us nervous. But it is also about us. It insists, the argument does, and Paul does, that the Spirit gives us all gifts, all of us. And further, that all gifts matter. And not only do they matter, but they are indispensable for the common good. God activates gifts in every one, for the common good. All, for all.

Paul rehearses a litany of what that looks like, and reminds us one last time that the Spirit empowers each of us. All are given gifts for the common good. Every gift matters because every gift is needed.

That was one of the revolutionary affirmations of the Protestant Reformation, articulated by Martin Luther as the doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers.” No one, Luther reminded the church, was more important than anyone else. A priest did not occupy a higher theological plane than the rest of us. John Calvin and others followed and expanded, more or less. Our Presbyterian system didn’t take it as far as some, but it took it pretty far, so that ministers, in our world, have certain tasks, and leaders – elders and deacons and trustees – have certain tasks, and members have certain tasks. All are given gifts and all are indispensable for the church to be the church it is fully called to be.

We have gotten off course when we have forgotten that, either officially, in how we’ve laid out restrictive qualifications for ordination, or unofficially, when power and prestige have gotten in the way of the Spirit’s working. We know what it looks like when spiritual gifts are stifled. And we know what it looks like when they are liberated. I will take liberated every time, even at the risk of chaos and dis-order and upsetting the status quo. Perhaps we can trust the Spirit to work all of that out, as Paul insists that we do.

I came to our Dining Room Ministry on the day after Christmas, and it was perhaps the highlight of my holiday season, second

only to the Buckeyes teaching the Fighting Irish a little lesson. On that morning, I watched a wonderful kitchen crew—some cooking, some washing, some setting the table – different gifts at work. They didn't let me near the food, wisely, but I was running plates back and forth and setting tables. I then spent a long time visiting with the guests, who are a marvelous mix of temperaments and experiences. One had one of our blue hymnals in his hand and we spoke of our favorite hymns. I shared a chat about NBA basketball with another, about 6 foot 8 inches! Another insisted to me that he had met a good church-going woman who was making a difference in his life. I told him the same thing had happened to me! Many gifts in the kitchen, all Spirit inspired, and many of Paul's gifts at those tables – wisdom, faith, discernment. And any pretense I had about anything less than full equality simply faded away as one man and I pledged to pray for one another as we each faced our own holiday challenges.

That is why this weekend is so important, this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend. King's work by now is known as political and social, and rightly so. But at its heart it is theological. It is this, the insistence that the Spirit gives every beloved child of God gifts to use for the common good. The corollary of that insists that to deny those gifts – particularly for something as insignificant as skin color (race as social construct) – not only denies that child of God dignity, but denies the Spirit the opportunity and ability to do its work, to be the Spirit.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream, which I worry we have sanitized and compartmentalized, was not really *his* dream, at the end of the day, but *this* dream. All are given gifts to use for the common good. And all gifts matter. So that when we deny those gifts, because of race, or power, or wealth, we deny our fellow humans the right to be fully human. We deny ourselves the opportunity to receive their gifts. And we deny God, and God's hopes for us, and God's vision for how the church and the world might be.

That is a political and social vision, of course, and perhaps it is a central lens by which we examine our world, even as we prepare to elect a new president in 300 days or so. Use that lens of equality and justice as a way to sort out the wheat and the chaff in our national discourse, or as a way to think about life in our region, or our city. That is what civil rights and human rights are all about.

So yes, a political and social vision. But remember that for King, and for us, this is *ministry*. Listen to this portion early on in his "I Have a Dream Speech." "There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, 'When will you be satisfied?' We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied, as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels

of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating 'For Whites Only.' We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Read those words as brilliant rhetoric. Read those words as a powerful political and social and cultural call. But read them also as a compelling theological interpretation of this – "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Our calling, some 20 centuries later, has not changed: To claim our giftedness. To claim the giftedness of others, and to get out of the way so that they can do the same. To let the Spirit be the Spirit, for our own good, for the common good. Amen.