

Many Gifts, One Spirit

I Corinthians 12:4-13, 27-31

There's an epidemic sweeping our nation. Professionals can only guess as to where it came from, and Lord only knows where it's going. Some say it came from years of being overlooked; some say it arose suddenly out of some sort of gross negligence of the human condition; but all are left to wonder--what's next? To the best of my knowledge and research this epidemic has not killed anyone, or at the very least it would be hard to tell. Despite this, it has ruined quite a few days in the lives of many. Preying on our weaknesses, it has robbed so many, too many, of relationships with loved ones, with friends, with neighbors. It has taken the familiar and made it strange, and made the strange familiar. This epidemic threatens all of us daily--threatens to divide house and home, church and congregation, rich and poor, sick and healthy, left from right, up from down.... I'll be honest, I don't know where to turn, and I think that sentiment strikes at the heart of many in this congregation more than we'd like to admit.

The epidemic that I'm speaking of, of course, is fake news. We're all susceptible to it to some degree. Because none of us know all things (thank God we don't), it's left so many of us with a distrust for those we once called 'friend,' and even more so a distrust for those outlets we once thought of as 'authoritative.' We are left to wonder 'is this correct? Or is this incorrect? 'What do correct and incorrect even mean? Are they contextual? Is my 'correct,' is my 'truth,' different from yours? By what standards do we judge right from wrong? Is it okay for me to disagree with something you say, or will I be judged as untrustworthy myself?' This distrust and discomfort has given rise to dysphoria and distaste. Being as unsettled as we are with our own answers for questions we once thought ironed out, we don't even want to hear about the important issues. (because, at the end of the day, who can we trust?). All are left walking on eggshells, not wanting to make a positive declaration for fear of lowering the status quo even further. What's more, we're left aggressively defensive: if someone says or does something that feels to us a breach of personal boundary we lash out, sometimes internally, sometimes in words or actions, and at the logical conclusion of it all, things are left broken. Those we love and those we know we are supposed to love become foreign; the things we once enjoyed become objects of controversy. Even things like attending church feels like a minefield. Not that is has ever been easy to be outward with a Christian faith, but today's social landscape makes it even more difficult. And that's not just beyond the walls of the church, that's within the church as well. If your faith compels you to take a political stance one way or the other, best of luck communicating that in a way to be received well. You're seemingly left with one of two options: be quiet, or leave. Or if you're feeling particularly stout, stick around, but be prepared to hear about it. What it feels like we have is a nation in turmoil and a Church not far behind.

It was a church in turmoil that Paul wrote to in Corinth. Corinth was a bustling center of commerce and culture in the 50s CE when Paul penned his letter. Destroyed in 146 BCE by Mummius, it was rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 44 BCE, likely because of its strategic military location and potential for commerce. From its refounding it was ethnically diverse, populated by freedmen and legionary veterans, but it was even more diverse by the time Paul was writing, being filled out by Syrians, Egyptians, and Greeks. Theologically speaking, there were Cynic philosophers, worshippers of the Greek goddess Aphrodite and the god Asclepius, worshippers of the Roman emperor (which was the state-sponsored religion that all had to more-or-less ascribe to), and certainly not the least of these were a sizeable Jewish population and, of course, early Christians as well. Corinth has been described as a "magnet of people of all sorts." This

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diversity, while perhaps positive in many ways, contributed to negative circumstances as well: a large gap between the rich and poor, a buzzing center of mixing and competing customs, and endless opportunity for dishonest and unscrupulous behavior. Does this sound familiar to you? A church striving to grow in-tune with an ever-changing customary landscape? A church that is one among many voices calling out to a population that's in search of meaning and purpose? A church that, within itself, sometimes struggles to find the right direction as expressions of the world echo through the halls? This sounds a lot like First UMC to me. I don't think it's pushing the boundary of this comparison between Moorestown and Corinth to think of the world's expressions echoing through our halls on Facebook feeds, Twitter feeds, and news updates.

I also don't think it's a stretch to think ancient Corinth suffered from its own versions of 'fake news.' In fact, this is practically what Paul was addressing within the Corinthian church. He writes, "For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" He goes on a bit longer, but I think it's pretty clear: these people had, according to Paul, lost their center. They had bought wholesale into false ideas which meant division and strife, and numerous claims and counterclaims as to who had it most right, leading to legal battles within the church.

Now maybe FUMC isn't at a stage of legal battle, thank God, but I'm sure some of you perceive division, or at the very least topics in which you must tread lightly for fear of being put into a certain circle. And inevitably some of you put yourselves very proudly in those circles, wanting people to know where you stand and to which you belong. Paul sarcastically addresses those divisions and factions by saying, "Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine," knowing very clearly that the only genuine faction is that which is unified by the name of Jesus: "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united the same mind and the same purpose." The word 'agreement' here could certainly mean eliminating disagreement by virtue of having the same opinions about all matters, but I think the word 'division' is really what's doing the heavy lifting in this passage. Paul wants to eliminate quarreling, to eliminate artificial detachments, that the people of the Corinthian church may be united in their commission by Christ as the church to spread the news of God's eternal reconciliation with humanity through Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Paul wants the church to better live into its mission to act as people truly transformed.

Again, Paul could be calling the church of Corinth to be in agreement with one another in all matters, but more likely it's the division he's addressing, the propensity of the people to succumb to artificially demarcating themselves due to false and near-idolatrous ideas. In fact, he embraces the idea of diversity, of unique ways of interacting in the church and world; he writes, "Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many." The issues arise when these varied parts say to another, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," or when one part proclaims to the other, "I have no need of you, you are of no use to me." There are yet more problems when the entire body proclaims that it is an eye or an ear, for where could the other faculties possibly come from? What function can a body fulfill if its various parts choose to serve their own ends without taking into consideration the needs of the whole, when those parts find ways to exclude or elevate themselves through worldly shortcomings? God has arranged the

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body in such a way that all parts are necessary; God is served in the individuality of each member. The Anchor Bible Commentary, in commenting on the body-church analogy, puts it this way: “In a congregation where there are party quarrels, class rivalries, and quandaries occasioned by sex, marital status, religious background, and spiritual practice, the place of each member ought to be guaranteed by his or her individuality as a creature of God.”

There is a beautiful balance in the uniqueness of every individual in the church, a balance that eliminates division and establishes mutual care for one another. This can only come about, however, if the true nature of our individuality is characterized properly, for it is the divine gifts we are each blessed and bestowed with that is both the power and a problem of the church. If we each recognize our gifts as reason to ‘take what’s ours’ without fully giving of ourselves, or we focus on the gifts themselves as where our value comes from, the beauty of the church, the wholeness of the body that God intended, is destroyed. If we divide ourselves as belonging to one camp or another, one value or another, the effectiveness of Christ through the church is voided. What we are then left with is a collection of individuals producing and buying into fake news, setting our defensive traps for those that cross our ‘tolerance’ threshold. I will be the first to confess, while my intentions may be aimed high, this is far too often how I find myself.

We must remember that it is not our gifts that make us valuable, it is the *apportionment* of the divine gifts by the Holy Spirit, the divine touch of God, that gives us value *and* common cause. “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” When living in the community that God ordained to be the hands and feet of Christ, our Spiritual blessings, the grace privately bestowed on each of us, becomes the common possession of the rest. Our divisions mean nothing, and can only mean nothing when viewed with that in mind. We each are called to live into the gifts that God has seen fit to bless us with for the benefit of one another. And all this can only happen when we seek to live into the highest gift of all, love. This is not romantic love, or brotherly love that Paul is speaking of; it is divine love, the love we witnessed on the cross. A stark display of willingness to enter the worst condition that ever faced a human being. A love that strikes us humans as foolishness, but it is wiser than any prideful human knowledge or wisdom we can achieve. It is a love that transforms our hearts, breaks down our sinful divisions, and is a basis for our hope and life. Today we take Communion in remembrance of this love, a love that unites us and carefully threads together each of our unique gifts into one body, the church. As you partake in the bread and cup, lift up your neighbors in prayer, that we might all eliminate our divisions, our foolishness before God, through recognition of our Spiritual diversity. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.