

Greater Unity

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

May 31, 2020

Today is Pentecost, a day where we usually read the story of how the Spirit descends upon the disciples at a mass gathering of people in Jerusalem who have traveled great distances to worship there. We hear how tongues of fire appear over them and they begin speaking in the languages of the various peoples assembled. We have a laugh at how, after being called “drunk”, those calling them drunk are corrected “because it’s only nine in the morning,” and apparently, 5 p.m. was the socially-acceptable time to drink back then as well. The selected reading for today expands upon the common reading for Pentecost. In the common reading for Pentecost, we see the Spirit bestowing the gift of speaking in tongues to the disciples so that all might hear and know the gospel of Jesus Christ. The reading for today, though, lists, in addition to “speaking in tongues,” such gifts as *interpreting* tongues, prophecy, faith, healing, and so much more. Paul, in so writing to the Corinthians about this, is making a few very important points about the “gifts of the Spirit.”

First and foremost, Paul’s main emphasis here is that these gifts all come from the same source: the Holy Spirit. The ability to speak in tongues as opposed to interpret tongues, one’s faith, the ability to heal the body as opposed to the spirit or vice versa, all these gifts and more are gifts from the Holy Spirit. What’s more, these are not gifts that are bestowed only upon some. Instead, we come to find that everyone has at least one gift of the Spirit, if not more. Granted, no one person has all of them, but all persons have at least one of them. Paul makes this point in referring to the human body having many members, each with its own function and abilities, and this is an interesting analogy to reflect upon. Think about it: feet cannot hear, nor hands see, nor ears walk. Every part of the body has a specific function, a “gift” if you will, and none serves a greater purpose than any other, which leads into Paul’s second point.

Secondly, and in tandem with the first reason, Paul is attempting to disprove that any one gift is better than another. As Heidi Haverkamp writes, “Gifts are not a hierarchy of achievements or a proof of faith. A gift of the Spirit is not something earned. Paul tells the Corinthians that their spiritual lives and actions are not about personal worthiness or effort, but pure gift: the result of the grace, desire, and activation of the Spirit.” Sure, someone might be

able to quote the Bible forwards and backwards, a notable and admirable gift to be certain, but without the gift of knowing what those words mean or without someone to tell what those words mean, they are empty words. They are lines and dots on paper, nothing more. Sure, someone might be able to interpret the Word of God, but without any faith either within the interpreter or those hearing the interpretation, such words lose meaning and fall on deaf ears. Perhaps someone has a “stronger” faith than another, but that does not mean that they are “greater” than anyone else. Both persons have the gift of faith, and that fact is what truly matters. Referring back to Paul’s analogy of the body, just as the feet rely upon the heart to pump blood to them to allow them to move and the heart relies upon the brain to tell it to pump blood, so too do all spiritual gifts rely upon each other to accomplish their goals. Spiritual gifts work in tandem with one another, none greater than the other, all serving a unified purpose, which happens to be Paul’s final point.

Finally, these gifts of the Spirit are all to be used for accomplishing God’s ultimate goal: unity. The different members of the body rely upon each other to function properly. The different spiritual gifts rely upon each other to have their value truly realized. What’s more, these gifts we speak of, they come from the same being, the same source, and therefore, it is to one being, the Triune God, that we owe our thanks. No matter which way we look at this, whether it be that there is a reliance upon one another’s gifts or the fact that such gifts come from a common source, there is a unifying quality about these gifts, said unity being a gift in and of itself, wouldn’t you say?

In the end then, what we have is a fine-tuning of the original message of Pentecost. With the common story with the flaming tongues, we celebrate the birth of the church, the point where our unity as a faith began. However, with this story, taking place some twenty years after, we have a better definition of this “unity.” No longer is it “We are all Christians, but some are better than others.” With this, we as Christians come to an understanding of our being dependent upon one another and no one Christian being better or worse than another simply because they have one gift and not another. Just as all parts of the body are necessary for a person to properly function, so too are all gifts necessary to keep the Kingdom of God going. So, in closing, I ask you all to consider not just what gifts you may have but how those gifts compliment and support the gifts of another. How are your gifts supporting or supported by the gifts of another?