

Date: September 10, 2006

SUNDAY: Ordinary 23

SERMON: From the One, Many

Text(s): 1 Corinthians 12: 1-11

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This coming Saturday, the Church Council and all of our elected committees will be spending the day together. Usually our annual Council Retreat is just for the members of the Church Council itself, but this year, we decided to involve as many of our lay leadership as possible, so all of the members of our elected committees are invited as well.

In the morning session, we're going to be engaging in what promises to be an intriguing, perhaps provocative, and hopefully an inspiring exercise. I'm not going to say too much more about it at this point, because I don't want to spoil the fun, (and it will be fun), but I can say that the whole exercise will be based upon the metaphor of the church as the Body of Christ. This particular metaphor has been perhaps the most commonly used description of the church all down through the centuries, and St. Paul appears to have been the first to use it. It's important for all of us, whether we're going to be part of the retreat or not, to think and reflect together about just what it means to call ourselves "the body of Christ." So the staff decided that for this Sunday and the next two Sundays, we'd develop our worship services around this metaphor, and in particular, the most prominent passage in Paul's writings where he expounds on it. We'll be looking at the 12th and 13th chapters of 1 Corinthians, so I encourage all of you to spend some time with those two chapters over the next several weeks.

It might be helpful to share a few hints about how to make sense of Paul's letters. One thing is that, with the possible exception of Philemon, which is addressed to an individual rather than a congregation, all of Paul's letters in our New Testament show signs of being edited and collected not long after his death as a martyr. Some of them contain fragments of two or more

separate letters that got stitched together in the collection process. So not every letter hangs together as a single, unified and coherent document. There's a lot of "cut-and-paste" flavor to them.

Another thing that may be helpful to know is that none of Paul's epistles were conceived as theological treatises intended for multiple congregations or wider audiences. All of them are occasional documents; that is, they were pastoral letters addressed to particular congregations to answer specific questions they were asking or to address particular issues with which they were struggling. Paul's theology is theology done on the road, so to speak. It's practical rather than systematic or theoretical. And over the 20 year span from the earliest to the latest, his thought developed and matured and changed. So what he says in an early letter may not be entirely consistent with what he says in a different context or a later time.

And finally, Paul habitually uses some phrases or terms to signal the reader that he's making a move in his subject matter. For example, our passage today begins with the phrase "Now concerning spiritual gifts." This "now concerning" is a very common phrase throughout Paul's correspondence. It's his way of saying, "OK, next topic." That helps us to follow his thinking from one question or issue to the next without trying to look for some sort of overall theme or coherence in the whole document.

From Paul's opening greeting at the beginning of this epistle we learn that the church in Corinth is blessed with an abundance of gifts and graces. They're a church of the "gifted and talented." Not surprising, perhaps, given the importance of Corinth as a cosmopolitan artistic and intellectual center, as well as an international port city. From all we have been able to learn through archaeology, the best and the worst of just about everything flourished in Corinth. It was a crossroads of the Roman empire. And as this letter goes on to make clear, the church at Corinth reflected that same spectrum of strengths

and weaknesses, virtues and vices. It was the best of churches and the worst of churches, as these letters reveal.

The trouble appears to be that the congregation is seriously divided into competing factions. Through the first eleven chapters of this letter, we discover that there are a variety of issues that have sparked these divisions, some theological, some ethical, and some tribal, and some just the result of individual competitiveness and spiritual snobbery. He reminds them that Christ is not divided, and, as Christ's body, they themselves should not be permitting such divisions to persist. He also reminds them that being a Christian is no reason for anyone to feel superior to their pagan neighbors or to their Jewish compatriots who do not follow Christ. After all, he tells them, the Christ they confess as Lord was a Jewish peasant crucified by the Romans as a rebel against imperial power. The Christian affirmation that God's wisdom and power is displayed in the death of Jesus on the cross, and his subsequent exaltation as Lord of all, is seen as scandalous by Jews and utterly ridiculous nonsense by intellectually-minded Gentiles. Which is perhaps why the great second-century church father Tertullian summed it up in his own dialogue with a snooty pagan critic, "I believe that which is absurd."

The confession "Jesus is Lord," to which Paul refers in today's lesson, and which is the earliest Christian statement of faith known to us, was a very politically-charged and dangerous confession. It was dangerous because its unspoken corollary was, "Therefore Caesar is not Lord." If refusing to acknowledge Caesar as the Ultimate Power cost Jesus his life, why would his followers expect that their similar confession will confer some sort of cachet of spiritual superiority. There are no grounds at all, in short, for any sort of Christian triumphalism.

And that leads to the focus of today's text. Paul has taught the Corinthian Christians that the animating life of the congregation is the Spirit of

God. It is the Holy Spirit's presence that equips them and empowers them to go on confessing Christ as Lord accepting the political dangers, social ostracism, and economic risks that such a confession may entail.

But some members, apparently, inspired more by status-seeking than by the Holy Spirit, are engaging in spiritual one-upmanship. If confessing Christ as Lord is not going to win them fame and fortune outside the church, then within the church, they're going to make up for lost time by assigning more value to some gifts for ministry and faith than to others and using those values to set up a kind of class system within the church. Certain gifts confer a higher status than others. In particular, those gifts that displayed themselves in some sort of ecstatic way, such as speaking in ecstatic speech during public worship or claiming to be a prophet who had a direct message from God for everyone else were held by these Corinthians to be the most important gifts of the Spirit, and therefore the most to be coveted and honored.

Do you see where the problem is? It's not with the fact that a person's particular strengths or gifts make them a natural choice to fulfill certain needed functions within the life of the community of faith. That's what gifts of the Spirit are all about. It's the assignment, whether consciously or unconsciously, of status or worthiness on the basis of particular gifts that is the problem.

In so many churches there have always been gifted lay leaders whose gifts have been recognized and used. But sometimes, the status accorded those people has hindered our understanding that every single member of the church is called to, and gifted for, the work of ministry by the same Spirit of God. Congregations often set up their own "gifted and talented club." That small percentage of the members end up doing everything, often getting burned out and resentful in the process, while a larger percentage take up a pew on Sunday as

spectators because they don't feel they are particularly gifted or because others haven't recognized their gifts and called upon them. And as a result, they often feel less valued and of lower status than those whose gifts are more obvious and public.

That's the issue— a common issue in almost every church— that Paul is addressing when he says, *“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of ministries, but the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”*

That last sentence is the key one: *“to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”* From the One Spirit, many gifts. That notion of the common good is one which in our society at the present time seems almost absent from public discourse. Individual freedom of choice is the watchword of our culture, and while individual freedom is a good thing, if it brackets out the notion of the common good, then we are left with a self-centered and selfish society. Which, of course, from my perspective anyway, is a fairly accurate description of what we've become as a nation. Would any of the great issues we face as a global community be as problematical if our primary commitments were to seeking the common good rather than insisting on our right to choose whatever we want. To take only one example, imagine how different our world might look if we Americans, who make up only 5% of the world's population, didn't insist on lifestyles and individual consumer choices that result in our using 25% of the world's energy resources and producing nearly 25% of all the world's CO₂ emissions.¹ Fortunately, in some circles, the notion of the common good has not totally disappeared. Bowdoin College is one of the places where concern for the common good is still alive. Next Saturday is the annual Common Good day for the Bowdoin community, a day

when community service will be the order of the day. But in our society as a whole, that concern is more conspicuous by its absence from our political, economic, and social ethics.

Paul insists that the common good is God's own concern, and that God has blessed every member of Christ's body, the church, with some gift for contributing to the common good. The shopping list of spiritual gifts that Paul goes on to name is not an exhaustive list. It's merely exemplary. There are as many gifts of the Spirit as there are members of the church. Each of us has a unique and indispensable gift for expressing the hope of the gospel in our own lives, and for sharing that expression of hope with others both inside and outside the congregation. Whether it's a gift for choral singing or for intercessory prayer or for teaching a class or for facilitating a group decision-making process or for helping negotiate between differences of opinion or for planning how to use our facilities to the greatest effect or how to encourage people to become generous stewards of our gifts or being able to bring a cheering presence by writing notes or paying a visit to someone who's home-bound or bring a reminder of Christ's caring to a fellow-member who's in the hospital struggling with illness or chairing a committee or helping to organize a Habitat for Humanity project or extending Christian hospitality to those who feel unwelcome or for giving prophetic leadership in addressing social injustice or, well, the list could go on all day.

Some of these gifts of the Spirit are primarily given for building up our life together as a congregation; others are given to enable us to extend the ministry of Christ to the world outside our congregation. But all are important, all are given by one and the same Spirit, and all are given for the purpose of making the love and grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ a reality in the world. It has to start within our own fellowship; we have to model what such a hospitable, hopeful, caring, non-violent, non-

competitive society looks like. But God's ultimate goal is nothing less than the reconciliation and healing of the whole world.

If we could begin to grasp that each of us is called to recognize and use the spiritual gifts given to us for ministry, we would be astounded at the power that would unleash, and of the force for good that we would become.

In one of the congregations in New Jersey that I served, there was a man named Dave Williams. Dave was retired from a career with Union Carbide, and he lived in the center of the city. During the 60's and 70's, when the center of so many of our cities became grim ghettos of poverty and despair, unfit for human habitation, unlike many of his neighbors who fled to the suburbs, Dave decided it was his city, and he was going to stay there and work to make it a better place. Now Dave didn't have the gift of leading public crusades against poverty and injustice. He was so self-effacing that he was too shy even to read the scriptures on Sunday in worship. But he did have the gift of caring and helping. In the church, Dave was the go-to guy whenever any small project needed some attention. He was very handy with tools, and if there was some maintenance work or painting or minor repairs to be done, everybody knew Dave was the guy to call.

But Dave knew that the common good was not only about serving his church family; it meant serving his neighborhood as well. He and his wife were one of the few remaining white families in the midst of some of the most depressing poverty-stricken neighborhoods in the whole city, a place where drugs and violence and abuse were the daily lot for many people.

If there was a poor widow, living in a run-down apartment or house, and her storm windows were broken, guess who noticed and volunteered to fix them? It was Dave also, who went out every morning and swept up the broken crack vials and drug paraphernalia from the

sidewalks to protect the children who would be walking to the school nearby. If one of his elderly neighbors needed someone to drive them to the doctor's, it was Dave who took them and helped them fill out the often confusing paperwork. And on Tuesday afternoons, he was one of those from the church who went down to that school in the middle of the ghetto and spent a couple hours helping to tutor little kids in math.

Many gifts, one Spirit. Many services, one Lord. Many ministries, one God. May God give us all the grace to discover and affirm one another's gifts, and the courage to use those gifts in service to our own congregation and to the world.

1. www.earth-policy.org/Indicators/CO2/2004.htm