

Many Gifts, One Spirit

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The First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ
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The apostle Paul had an exciting pastoral position in the town of Corinth. Corinth was a particularly exciting town if you were a sports fan. In Corinth you could go out every night to see any sort of game imaginable. The night life there was great. Lot's of dancing and theater and, of course, the 1st century equivalents of sports bars.

But with all this excitement, there was a seamy downside to Corinth. In this competitive and cosmopolitan environment, it seemed athletes received most of the attention at the expense of everyone else. Beautiful people were glorified. The elite were regaled for their intellectual and philosophical brilliance as they looked down their nose at other folks. Still others had a lot more money and time to take advantage of all that Corinth had to offer but were critical of those who could not afford such things. Indeed, in Corinth there was a hostility to the poor where those with money would try to extort more money from those who did not have any money. And when the poor could not pay, the rich would trump up some charges and have the poor carted off to jail. Prostitution was also rampant along with public drunkenness. Some said that many people in Corinth worshipped the God's of money, sex, and power.

Often churches reflect somewhat the cultures in which they dwell. And the church in Corinth was no exception. In the Corinthian church, spirituality had an elitist quality to it. There were some people who thought their spiritual gifts were important than another. They felt they were a little closer to God than everyone else. For instance, being able to speak in tongues was revered by many. If you spoke in tongues you were thought of as one who truly possessed the Holy Spirit. Other spiritual gifts did not have the same importance. Paul was also concerned about the practice of communion. In the Corinthian church, the rich and those who did not have to work, would gather for a lavish meal in the afternoon at which communion would be served. When the poor and working folks were done with a day's labor, they would try to come join the wealthy for communion but would only get what was left over after the meal. This was a church full of people, deeply influenced by Corinthian culture, who had big egos and a whole lot of tension with each other.

There were cliques. There was competitiveness. There was division among people of different incomes. And people used their spiritual and financial gifts not to build up the whole but to pump themselves up at the expense of others. When Paul showed up to pastor to this congregation he really had a big spiritual mess on his hands. It was just awful. So what did Paul do? Well if you read his words opening words in Corinthians 12 he said "Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.

What was Paul saying here? Paul was saying to the Corinthians that they should be cautious about using Jesus' name without the proper spirit within them. Claiming Christ in your life did not mean much if it did not lead you to build up the community or the common good. For instance, Jesus was not to be an arrogant badge of honor becoming like your exclusive

personal trainer. Paul wanted Christian to be careful that they did not look down on others. For Paul the true test of one's faith was the willingness to help and encourage others in the community especially those who might be perceived to be weaker or of little faith.

As many of you know, I was a pastor in the mid-west. And as a pastor, some of my parishioners would visit other places and then come back regale me with stories about enormous churches which looked like extensions of Corinthian, woops I mean Chicago sports culture. Metropolitan Chicago had many mega churches. I remember hearing about these two pastors who were former football players who strutted out on a big stage in a large movie theater which they rented out on Sundays. Worship began with them giving each other high fives and bear hugs as if they were beginning a football game as the band played loudly behind them. It makes our passing of the peace seem pretty tame. Their preaching focused on individual salvation as everyone absorbed this message in their individual movie seats. I thought to myself "why not serve popcorn and hot dogs"? I am sure these gentlemen offered an inspirational message filled with stories from their sporting exploits. But after people had their spiritual fill up, people filed out of worship to do their next thing and forgot about what they heard.

The sense of community was not all that great. For some of these churches, the individualistic and consumer oriented spirituality built around the image of a pastor began to wear a little thin. Predictably many saw a decline in membership as more people started to ask if this was all there was. Jesus just seemed too small. Instead, I think many seekers just left. But others wanted to go deeper to find a sense of the Holy Spirit and a greater sense of community. They came to understand that they did not want church community to be an extension of their television sets. They did not feel like they were at a Chicago Bears game.

Mainline churches, of course, had their own struggles with pretense and unbridled individualism. We worship all kinds of stuff: money, buildings, music instruments, preachers, choirs, or the way we always used to do it what ever that is. So often church life is marked by complaints from parishioners about how tired they are and how they wish that someone else would do something. Other churches have a very contracted sense of their generosity and ability to give.

There was this story about how a preacher gave a stirring sermon to her church about how Jesus was Lord and head of the church. During the sermon, the chair of the Trustees sitting in the front row leaned over and audibly grumbled to his wife, What do you mean Jesus is the head of the church I thought the head of the church was the Board of Trustees!

So the Corinthian church had its issues and so do all churches in our world of all styles and theological persuasions who worship one sort of false God or another and shove Jesus to the side. Paul's exhortation to Corinthian Church I think is every bit as important for us today as it was 2,000 years ago. Paul was eager to help each person in a community of faith discover their gifts. Paul said to the Corinthians and to us that in a church there are a variety of services and a variety of activities but they are all activated by one God. Some have the ability to utter wise words. Still others have great knowledge to convey. Others have the ability to heal. Others can work miracles. Some have the ability to be prophetic. Some can run a spread sheet and balance a budget. Some people are blessed with financial resources and give generous sums. Still others have few resources and yet give a widow's mite which is sacrificial for them but may be a small sum for others. Others can arrange flowers and create a holy space. Some have the ability to

extend hospitality to strangers. Others can preach and still others teach. Some are good with young people and others know how to work with those who aging. Others can sing, and still others can't carry a tune worth their life but they sing with energy and spirit. And on it goes. In this church and every other church we have a variety of gifts but it is activated by the same spirit.

And what is that spirit? Well it's the Holy Spirit which emanates from a humble Christ who through his life, death, and resurrection teaches us to serve. If Jesus is really Lord, then the central task of the church always is to build up the community and promote the common good. The holy work of the churches involves taking an interest in the gifts of everyone in the church and then encouraging people to use their gifts to the best of their ability to glorify God.

As I think about our life here together at First Congregational Church, I want you to know that one of the big reasons I came here was that I was so impressed with the variety of gifts which people have in this congregation. Everyday it is such a privilege to meet one more person who has a story to tell about their life. Everyday it seems I uncover one more treasure and one more gift. The gifts offered come from brand new people coming here for the first time while others who have been here a long time. Each person here has an ability and a passion, a life experience and an extraordinary gift to offer. This is a congregation which has a big heart. This is a place which seeks to do the right thing and the just thing. This is place where we seek to use what God has given us to care for the weakest and most vulnerable among us.

But if we take the apostle Paul seriously, we must not take one another for granted or use our gifts so as to boast at the expense of other people or churches. Instead, if Christ is at the center of what we do, then we must build up the body by encouraging one another. We are here to be Christ for another. We are Christ's hands, mouth and feet.

Over the last few years, this church worked so hard to work with the search committee to articulate a vision for its future. Long before I knew about this congregation, there were people who gave heart and soul to make this church strong and shape a vision. The church identified some top priorities which it wanted the new pastor to work on with this church.

They are:

1. Strengthen our pastoral care for members and friends
2. Widening our church's welcome to new people,
3. Strengthening our outreach and justice work,
4. Creating worship which makes the full use of the talents and gifts of others and is marked by inspirational preaching rooted deeply in an inclusive vision of the Gospel.
5. Strengthening our ministry with children and youth and include them in the central life of our church,
6. Expanding the number and diversity of our adult education offerings,
7. Building a strong staff team
8. Encouraging laity to use their gifts for ministry and

9. Improving our financial position as a church.

I am pleased to report that in the last six months, we have worked hard together and made good steps forward in each of those areas which the church said was important. But as we go forward, I know the good things we have done will not sustain themselves unless we encourage and challenge one another in our ministry.

We want to serve Christ in the very best way we can to make the church strong now and for future generations. There are many opportunities to do so.

I hold up two.

One of the things we said to each other was to create a place where people can use their gifts to do ministry. In that spirit, Ellen Pine, our chair of nominating has worked hard with her committee to hold a simple fair after church where you are invited to imagine how you can use your gifts to assume a particular ministry in our church. I would like to ask you to bring an encouraging and open spirit, and come to the fair and meet a few folks even if you have some reluctance to see what is available and consider making a formal commitment to serve. The opportunities to serve are available to members and non-members alike. Of course, with all ministry worth anything there is fun and fellowship but it is also challenge and hard work because what we do matters. It feels great to work hard if you feel as though what you are doing matters.

And second, I ask that we do what ever we can to encourage one another in the person to person stewardship campaign. Last week we kicked off the Person to Person campaign with a great congregational meeting where great questions were asked. Many of us left that meeting feeling hopeful and encouraged. So thanks. As we get into this campaign we will have an opportunity for us to visit in every home and share with one another what is on our hearts, to ask questions, and share our hopes and dreams. It is also an opportunity for each of us to seriously consider how we can financially support the ministry which is important to us. I promise to you that this will be a fun and enjoyable and very respectful process which will be done in a thoughtful and sensitive way.

But it is only going to work if all of us take a little bit of risk to visit and be visited. As with all significant ministry, it will only work if we have the servant heart of Christ and encourage one another. As one called to serve among you, I would never ask of others which I would not ask of myself. Which is why, Martha and I will be the first people to happily and gratefully receive a visit. I could fall into the trap of thinking that I know it all and have done it all and can do no more and the visitor would be wasting their time. I have my own spiritual baggage around the church and money. But while I know I might be a little nervous, I know that the person visiting might be even more nervous than I am and is in need of my encouragement and my receptivity.

So I look forward to that visit from Tony Hall, our campaign chair and it is my prayerful hope that when you are asked to visit or to be visited that you will graciously offer your encouragement and accept the invitation. I promise that the Holy Spirit, will be working through this visiting process as we endeavor to use our gifts to build up the common good.

As we allow the Holy Spirit will have its way with us, I promise you that every gift no matter how small or large will be gratefully and thankfully received. So lets us now allow the spirit of Jesus to have its way with us. Let us use the gifts God has given us to serve and deeply care for each other and this community of faith which we hold dear. Amen.