

God gives us gifts for the common good

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey

at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA, January 20, 2019

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany (year C), 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 (John 2:1-11)

1 Corinthians 12:1-11(NRSV) *Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. 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. 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. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.*

Here's a story of a Pot Luck Supper. Only this isn't any ordinary pot luck supper, this is a Corinthian Pot Luck Supper. When the church at Corinth gathers, there is a great combination of good food. José brings his homemade salsa; Bill (who isn't that great a cook) brings a bag of chips anyway. Mrs. Perkowski brings her famous pirogues; Dr. Davidson brings his roast beef, Janet brings her sherbet punch, and Sue brings her green bean casserole. With such delicious food, you would expect a very joyful gathering.

However, this is a Corinthian Pot Luck. In Corinth, each person takes the food he or she brought, and going to separate tables, they eat only their own food. Now, José would love to have some of Bill's chips. And Bill would love to have some of José's salsa. Mrs. Perkowski sure would enjoy her pirogues with some of that sherbet punch and some green bean casserole. And Sue would really enjoy roast beef with her green beans. And they all would have enjoyed each other's company. Sadly, a few came unaware of their abilities to cook, and some came without food to bring, and they left hungry.

Then the close of the Corinthian pot Luck is the special desert. However, the buffet has strange offerings. You find Joe filling out two bowls—one of sugar and one of brown sugar. Carol sets out a plate of butter, George whips up a bowl of raw eggs, and Kristin sets out a bowl of flour. This strange arrangement is called a Corinthian Cake.

I don't know about you, but I find myself so hungry right now! I'm hungry for a complete meal. I'm hungry for a delicious homemade cake. And most of all, I'm hungry for some connection between these crazy Corinthians! God gave them wonderful gifts of food and cooking and fellowship. But they don't realize the joy they are missing by not sharing their gifts for the common good.

In today's New Testament reading, we hear from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians—the real Corinthians whose problems aren't really with their pot luck suppers, yet they operate the church just the same way. Paul helped to start this church in Corinth. They were a motivated group of believers. They were energetic and open to the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

They discovered the joy and power of their life in Christ, and they discovered the spiritual and miraculous gifts that God gave them.

However, they became prideful and divided in their discoveries. Some felt that they were particularly important because they could work miracles, others saw themselves as special because of their gifts of healing, still others saw the gift of speaking in tongues as most important—or wisdom, or knowledge or discernment. So when they came together, they only saw their own gifts and did not share them for the common good. That's why I call that pot luck supper a Corinthian pot luck.

They loved their gifts, but they didn't realize how God gave them their gifts for the common good—for the whole church—for the whole body of Christ. They operated in competitive factions, ignoring the gifts of others, without being willing to cooperate or share so that God might be glorified. They were unwilling to see how the others and their gifts might be important to them. Even though all their gifts came from the same God—gifts given by the same Spirit for the common good—they would rather be divided and do their own thing.

The people of St. Peter & St. Paul do a lot together. We recognize gifts for particular ministries and empower people to use those gifts. We work together to answer God's call to mission, God's call to serve inside and outside of this parish. This whole process builds up the parish, and strengthens our common witness to Jesus Christ. I think that we also have room to grow, as individuals and as a community, as we use the gifts God gave us for the whole church.

Part of God's call to share our gifts for the common good has to do with listening to each other. If the Holy Spirit has been given to us to build up the whole church, then part of the way we listen for God is by listening to each other. However, we sometimes forget that the body of Christ is more than just our local congregation. There are Christians down the street and around the country. There are Christians around the world who also listen for the Holy Spirit. There are even Christians in other denominations given gifts to build up the whole body of Christ.

Wouldn't God be delighted if we could recognize and celebrate the gifts given to the Roman Catholic church? Or the gifts given to the Baptist Church or the Methodists or the mega churches, or the Pentecostals, or the Presbyterians? If we sought to listen to our brothers and sisters in Christ, and if we shared our gifts with them, we could together build up the whole body of Christ.

St. Peter & St. Paul is one of the larger parishes in the Episcopal Church. People who study congregations sometimes call parishes of our size "Resource Churches." We have the size and resources to be a blessing to the wider church. How are we using those blessings to build up the body of Christ and serve Christ in the world?

For years, we have partnered with the Episcopal Church of the Holy Comforter in Atlanta in their ministry to their developmentally disabled parishioners. Coming up in February, we will partner with There's Hope for the Hungry, a mobile food pantry. Many of the leaders of this ministry come from the Baptist church. They have unique language and style, and they have

experience in ministry from which we can learn. And we have experiences and perspectives that can build them up as well.

This summer we will send missionaries to share ministry with our brothers and sisters in Christ in Puerto Rico. What food can these brothers and sisters in Christ bring to our pot luck supper? They can share perspective, for sure. While we face delays in traffic around Atlanta, Puerto Ricans wait for roads to be built. While we suffer from the occasional power outage, Puerto Ricans go for weeks or more without electricity—*and that was before the hurricane.*

They can also share a love of family and extended family that can inspire us. They can share their own brand of American culture from which we can grow. And we can share with them the knowledge that they are not alone, and that they have our support as they rebuild.

One thing that we might learn by traveling to Puerto Rico is that we have brothers and sisters in Christ in similar circumstances here in Cobb County. In Austell and Windy Hill where Father Ramon serves, our brothers and sisters in Christ share some of the same blessings and struggles we do. But they also face other challenges and bring unique blessings that would enrich our lives. And yet, how would we know what gifts God has to build us both up, if we remain in our own communities? What blessings does God want to give to our communities through our common fellowship?

In the days ahead, we will be forming small Discipleship Groups for Bible study, prayer and fellowship. These will be unique opportunities to grow as brothers and sisters in Christ together to share our gifts to build each other up as we listen to each other. As we discover the gifts of God in these small groups, just think about how much more God has in store when we reach out further into the body of Christ.

You see, our Lord doesn't just invite us to a local pot luck supper. Our Lord invites us to a feast—a feast of great abundance for us to enjoy and to share. You'll notice from today's Gospel reading that Jesus doesn't see feasting as a meager and modest affair. After the wine had run out at the wedding at Cana, and even when Jesus is reluctant, he nonetheless turns over 120 gallons of water into wine. 120 gallons! This is a sign of God's abundance! God gives us an abundance of joy and faith and forgiveness and new life. God gives us resources of treasure and skills and generosity. God calls us to share these gifts with our brothers and sisters in Christ, and with the world around us.

Imagine the joy when those hungry and isolated Corinthians start sharing their food at the potluck supper! Imagine the joy of the hungry people outside when they are invited to the feast!

Come to the feast! Come to the feast of abundance in Jesus Christ. Come to the feast with our Catholic and Baptist brothers and sisters down the road. Come to the feast with our brothers and sisters in Christ in Puerto Rico, and Atlanta, and Windy Hill. Bring the gifts God has given you, and watch God transform them into joy for the whole family of Christ!

*Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to him from generation to generation in the church, and in Christ Jesus our Lord!*