



One Spirit of Love

A Pentecost Sermon on I Corinthians 12: 1-11

by Rev. Dr. Sharon E. Watkins

*“Many are the wonders of God
 Many doors open wide
 Many roads that are still untraveled
 Many are the gifts that we share
 Many are the gifts that we bear
 Many mysteries still unraveled*

Many gifts, One Spirit of Love, One Spirit of Love”

“Many gifts; one spirit of love,” so goes the song written by Disciples song-writer, Paul Svenson, mirroring this beloved passage of scripture. “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.” Beautiful!

To understand the power of this passage, it is helpful to look at its placement sandwiched between two other familiar words from Paul. In Chapter 11, we read about how the Corinthians – a new church start – would gather for worship and the Lord’s Supper – literally a supper. The leisure classes would arrive first, because, they had, well, leisure time for happy hour! By the time the working classes and slaves arrived, the early birds were quite “happy!” and well into the food as well as the drink. Not enough for all.

Paul called them on it. ²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For all who eat and drink[h] without discerning the body,[i] eat and drink judgment against themselves.”

“Discerning the body” is key. All who eat and drink without noticing who is there – or who is not there – calls judgment upon themselves. It’s not all about you, rich Corinthians! In the Christian family, there is room for all. Rich and poor; leisure and working class. Building on that, Paul continues – “So then, my brothers and sisters,[i] when you come together to eat, wait for one another.”

On Sunday morning, you will see Paul’s vision for the church in Corinth in action at MissionGathering congregations: a very wealthy lawyer sitting next to a homeless teenager. Founding pastor Rich McCullen says of the MissionGathering movement: “We have the freedom to build a church that all people can be a part of, and we can come together at the table every week and celebrate the love of Jesus.”



The ministry movement began in San Diego, with a focus on reaching homeless – or houseless – teenagers, many of whom are involved in sex work as a means of survival. The church goes out to meet these teenagers where they are, on the streets first, then builds trust, and then provides avenues for the youth to get off the streets. Partnering with the city to provide funding and help with housing, MissionGathering San Diego believes they are there to serve their neighborhood, to be a part of it, and to be in place there.

Pastor Rich describes MissionGathering's work as: "We are there to serve the neighborhood... and to not necessarily see people as numbers or converts, but to see people as neighbors... How can we be part of their journey and their life?"

MissionGathering Charlotte uses every inch of the old Methodist church they reside in. They partner with an organization that serves Charlotte's prostitution population and works to end sex trading across the American South. They have The Free Store: a place where people can give what they want to and take what they need for free. The MissionGathering churches intentionally place themselves in the heart of the communities they serve, find partners to enable a broader and more effective reach around a "collective cause," and offer a place where the spiritual and the missional comes together.

Many gifts, one Spirit of Love – as described in today's passage in Chapter 12: many gifts, one spirit of love. Paul lists those gifts: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues.

A modern-day version of this list might read: teacher, doctor, writer, cook, singer, builder, mathematician, preacher, housekeeper, scientist, counselor, translator, caregiver, farmer... and more.

Coming straight from his words addressing issues that had arisen in the Corinthian church due to social positions and class structures, it is not a mistake that Paul moves into a conversation about particular categories of gifts... just in case the Corinthians missed his point.

Everyone has a spiritual gift, each different and each important. And Paul is clear that spiritual diversity within the church community is created by the one Spirit. "4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone." Paul continues. This spiritual diversity of gifts is not an end in itself, but is intended to be used for the benefit of others... Paul calls it the common good.

Because the Spirit, according to Paul, is interested in the communal life of those it draws together and how those drawn together by the Spirit then work for the common good of their entire community... how they change the world for the better... many gifts, one spirit of love.

It is through this one spirit of love that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has started and affiliated over 980 new churches since 2001! The mantra has been: 1000 different churches 1000 different ways.

Many gifts. One Spirit. Working for the common good. Changing the world. Just like the world is changed for teenagers in San Diego and Charlotte through MissionGathering.

In the last decade and a half, we Disciples have started faith communities like MissionGathering, and like Arise Christian Church in Orlando, Florida, that started with a vision to be an intentionally multi-ethnic congregation with a mission to "walk alongside everyday

people sharing God's love." Samoan Congregational Church, also, shares many gifts, as it ministers to Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and their families in El Paso, Texas, by providing spiritual and mental health support. "Born in the desert to serve as a wellspring of new life," Coolwater Christian Church in Scottsdale, Arizona, believes the whole point of their faith is to live it out and give back, so every month they gather to spend a day in their community doing a hands-on mission project as a way of living out their values and beliefs. Our churches are using their many gifts, in the one spirit of love, to change the world for their communities. We give thanks for the loving, Pentecost spirit of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in its New Church movement.

Because on Pentecost the one church is born, but it speaks many languages. It's one community reaching out in many ways. It takes many gifts to reach the whole world. And if one is missing, one gift not present – as Paul continues in Chapter 12 – the body is not complete, the body is broken.

Amazing Grace Christian Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, knows this...

When Pastor Preston Adams, III, and his wife Greta started Amazing Grace Christian Church in Indianapolis seven years ago, they wanted to do ministry outreach and community work in a meaningful way. The year before, they had started the Urban Initiative, a nonprofit agency that provides mentoring in central Indiana schools. Then, the High Five Movement was born. Knowing that some young people in the community don't receive much positive encouragement or have strong role models, "The whole idea was to galvanize men and then ultimately women, to meet at local schools, elementary, middle and high schools, greet the kids when they get off the bus, provide them with a high five, a word of encouragement and tell them that 'we care, we love you and we are proud of you,'" Pastor Preston says.

Amazing Grace noticed that someone was missing. The young were missing – not from the church but from the graduation rolls in the Indianapolis Public Schools. So Amazing Grace decided to change the world by reaching out to the young folks, congratulating them, sharing with them the spiritual gift of encouragement.

Many gifts, one spirit of love. Churches changing the world, by going out into the world. Today we give thanks for the birth of the Church at Pentecost in all its diversity and in its essential, God-given unity. Many gifts; one Spirit. Changing the World. What Paul was calling for in Corinth was not the same-old, same-old. It was a new way of being. A way that made room for all. That noticed if one was missing. A way that was united but not uniform. It was the calling of the Corinthian church and it is the call for the Church today – many gifts. One spirit of love.

The final verse of Paul Svenson's song says it well:

*"Living as the body of Christ
And the heart of the earth
And the hands that will break new ground
Celebrate the gifts from within
Now it's time to begin
God's people can turn this world around now
Many gifts, One Spirit of Love, One Spirit of Love"*

In the spirit of Pentecost, let's receive our many gifts in the one spirit of love, and go out to change the world!