

“The Manifestation Of The Spirit”

1 Corinthians 12:4-13

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.

For just as the body is one and has many members,
and all the members of the body, though many,
are one body, so it is with Christ.

For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body —
Jews or Greeks, slaves or free
—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

The Manifestation of the Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:4-13

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I.

Today is Pentecost, originally a Jewish Feast celebrating the corn harvest which occurred 50 days after Passover. In the Christian calendar, Pentecost comes seven Sundays after Easter. Another name for Pentecost for those residing in England and Ireland, and for our Anglican and Methodist brothers and sisters all over the world, is Whitsunday; which expanded the ecclesiastical occasion into a cultural event as well, with the week following given over to celebrations in the form of fetes, fairs and pageants and was originally tied to agricultural rhythms which harken back to the original Jewish roots. Not unlike Canton's own Dairy Princess celebration, set to take place this coming week in the Park.

II.

Normally, on this day, the sermon text would be the story of the first Pentecost found in the second chapter of Acts. That wild image of a sudden rush of wind from heaven permeating the entire house. Tongues of fire resting on each person. Everyone being filled with the Holy Spirit. People watching, amazed and astonished, as every language was spoken; with the church being commissioned with the *responsibility*, and its people gifted with the *ability*, to speak God's deeds of power to all the world, in every possible tongue.

Pentecost is, in essence, the church's "Spirit Sunday." The day when the third shoe dropped, and the final person of the Trinity was introduced to the world and bestowed upon the church. Recognize, however, that the gift of the Holy Spirit did not *create* the church; rather, it *equipped* the church.

III.

Today, though, I have decided to preach not from the Pentecost story in Acts, but from Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth where Paul articulates what are often called "the gifts of the spirit." Just as Paul fleshed out and elaborated on so many theological concepts grounded in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, in today's text Paul expands on the role and

function of the Spirit for, and within, the church. Namely, that there are a variety of these spiritual gifts: the utterance of wisdom, the utterance of knowledge, faith, healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, the discernment of spirits, various kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. Each of these gifts, which is a manifestation of the Spirit, is first given by God, then activated by the Spirit solely for the purpose of the common good.

IV.

Though we will necessarily be treading on one of the battlefields in the culture wars, this morning as we welcome four new members to the congregation, as well as ordain and install a slew of Deacons and Elders, I would like to use the story of Pentecost, and Paul's understanding of spiritual gifts, to speak about the notion of diversity. When Paul states that there are *varieties* of gifts, services and activities, he might just as easily have said that there are a *diversity* of gifts, and a *diversity* of services and a *diversity* activities.

If I'm being honest (and I *always* endeavor to be honest, *especially* from the pulpit) I have never been a big fan of the notion of "diversity." Why this might be the case, I could never really articulate; other than to say something about the idea just always felt off to me. Thankfully, up until today, I was smart enough not to ever say such a thing in public; certainly not to my wife, and never to my daughter.

V.

This past week, though, I think I finally figured it out. I was watching a video clip on the news the other day. Someone was giving a graduation speech, and invited the audience to a rousing round of applause saying, "Look at our *beautiful* diversity!" I said to myself, "why would dissimilarity, in and of itself, have a virtue, let alone a beauty?" My sense is, in an effort to allow for difference (which I would agree is absolutely critical, everyone should be supported in being their own person) we have somehow convinced ourselves that simply being *unlike* everyone else, or most everyone else, should somehow be the goal. Now, before you say it (and I hope you would) I am *fully* aware that I am speaking as a white, heterosexual male. I am also fully aware that we live in a divided society and nation, particularly with regard to race; Senator Tim Scott's opinion on the matter notwithstanding.

VI.

That some schools districts in some states confuse *acknowledgment* with *admonishment* and are now refusing to teach it in no way changes the fact that the history of our country, in whatever part and to whatever degree, is unquestionably a story of how difference has been used to greatly diminish some and unfairly favor others. The question becomes, though, what are we to do about it?

Sticking our head in the sand only serves to keep it there. Certainly public policy, governmental initiatives, and judicial decisions have important roles to play in fostering institutional change. and ensuring fairness. Unfortunately, these have been increasingly the subject of polarization and partisanship. While necessary, especially at the onset, the past two decades have shown (sometimes in stunning fashion) that external solutions to internal problems rarely go the distance.

VII.

The result has been a cultural “zero-sum game” which assumes that benefit for some is only ever achieved at a corresponding cost to others; with ever-increasingly smaller issues becoming swords to fall on and hills upon which some, seemingly, would be glad to die. Which is how we found ourselves in this mess in the first place. Does it really matter what kinds of clothing the retailer Target chooses sell, or not? Do beer “woke” beer commercials actually have any bearing on the well-being of our nation? Apparently, to a great many, it does and they do.

In response, “difference” becomes a greater good and “diversity” a higher virtue which is, apparently, a thing of beauty. Though I understand the approach to the problem, and don’t blame anyone for trying, it is fairly plain to see that such solutions provide only marginal relief (pun intended) and, in many instances, serve to exacerbate an already intractable situation.

VIII.

It is at this point I would invite us to examine the notion of diversity through a philosophical lens. For century upon century, beginning with Plato and his Republic, the traditional philosophical view held that the essence, or the nature of a thing is more fundamental and immutable (that is, more

important; beautiful even) than its existence or mere fact of its being. In 1841 this view began to change owing to a speech given by the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling who proposed exactly the opposite. Sitting in the audience that day was the soon to be eminent Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who seized upon the idea and began to explore it in his work. Eventually, the baton was passed to Martin Heidegger, then Jean-Paul Sartre, who formulated a three word phrase that is at the heart of Existentialism: “Existence precedes essence.”

IX.

Existentialism maintains that human beings, through their consciousness, create their own values and determine a meaning for their life because the human being does not possess any inherent identity or value; such identity, or value, must be created by the individual. By manifesting the acts that constitute us, we make our existence more significant. Or, more simply stated, what we *do* becomes who we *are*.

Of course, when *who we are* is used to prevent us for doing *what we might*, we have a problem; not only for the individual, but the society as a whole. Unfortunately, in my opinion, the push to emphasize increasingly fine categories of essence, i.e., the beautification of dissimilarity such that it becomes the beatification of diversity, is the exact opposite of what we need to do in order to full and finally get us out of this mess.

X.

As you might expect, and as is usually the case for those of us in the Church, the answer to the problem is theological. While Existentialism begins with the central tenet that human beings do not possess any inherent identity or value, we Christians begin with the central tenet that our identity as the children of God creates ultimate and infinite value; such that God would even send his son not to condemn the world, but to save it. Interestingly, regardless of if you understand human beings, inherently, as having no value or, conversely, as having ultimate and unlimited value, either leads to the very same conclusion: in our essence, each one of us is no better and no worse than any other. Said another way, there is no such thing as a diversity of essence; quite simply, we are all the same. However, while there is no dissimilarity of essence between us, what we choose to do with our lives, our existence, our utility, our efficacy is how we are *distinguished*.

XI.

Before you all start thinking that old Rev. Mike has gotten way too far down in the weeds, recognize this very idea is expressed by Paul in today's scripture text from I Corinthians. When Paul says there are varieties of gifts, services, and activities, what he is really saying is that there is a "diversity" of spiritual expression or spiritual existence; with each flowing out from the same God and activated by the same Spirit in *everyone*. Moreover, these varieties, or this diversity of spiritual existence is given solely and expressly for *the common good*.

So, finally, we arrive at our solution: while we may not be *different* in our essence, as people, we have the responsibility and the privilege to be *distinct* in our existence *only so far* as it relates to the common good. Our inherent value as human beings arises from how we are uniquely equipped by God to serve and benefit the common good.

XII.

Today, Andrea, Mary, Joe and John have joined this congregation with no small amount of rejoicing. While we certainly value who they are as individuals, fellow children of God beautiful and sacred each in their own way, the real excitement comes from discovering what God has uniquely equipped them to do for the common good here in our church.

I knew when I began this sermon that I was, perhaps, running the risk of offending someone with what might be perceived as "anti-wokeness." Please understand, I'm not picking sides. On the contrary, there are, in fact, really are no sides *to pick* other than to side with God who has given the amazing and astonishing manifestation of the Spirit to equip us for the common good of our church, our community, our nation, and our world. Amen.