

## THE UNITY OF OUR DIVERSITY

### I Corinthians 12:1-11

#### Intro

Before we really get started, I want to assure you that I did not search out this passage: it was right there, part of the lectionary for the day, clearly seeking me out.

One of the great images that Paul was able to create in his writings was the idea that variety and unity do not have to be divergent ideas. One of the ways he articulated this thought was by talking about the body and how, even though all of the parts of the body are different, they are still working for the same goal keeping the body, mind, and spirit alive, healthy, and vibrant.

This morning's passage speaks to how the Spirit of God is able to work differently in different people, basically saying that just because the gifts are different does not mean that the same Spirit is not at work.

This was a message that audience in the city of Corinth really needed to hear.

While there is quite a bit of debate as to the specificity of the problems that we apparent in that church, what is obvious is that different segments of the church were segregating themselves from others because one group wasn't exactly like another group.

What I would like us to think about this morning is this: in terms of how we live together as the church, which is more important: uniformity, or the acknowledgement and celebration of the movement of the Spirit of God in different people's lives in different ways? The scripture reads this way.

#### **I Corinthians 12:1-11**

**12** Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. <sup>2</sup>You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. <sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; <sup>5</sup>and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; <sup>6</sup>and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. <sup>7</sup>To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. <sup>8</sup>To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, <sup>9</sup>to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

## “The Unity of our Diversity”

One of the great temptations as a pastor, and church leader in general, is to become isolated. What I mean by this is both that it is real easy to get swept up into the mentality that the only work that matters is the work that is happening within the walls of your church (and after a while, that is exactly what it can become: *your* church, not God’s church, but *your* church), and secondly that you have all of the answers, and if you don’t have all of them, then you’ve got most of them. It’s an ugly reality that very few people like to acknowledge could ever happen in an institution such as the church...until it does with brilliant flashing lights.

For example, the Reformed Church in America...you know, the little denomination of under 1000 congregation that stretches across the North American continent that happens to be the denominational home of this particular community of faith.

As we talked about last spring, the denomination has some very serious division lines that boil down to the topic of homosexuality.

On one side of the divide (and yes, it does feel like it boils down to two sides), are the leaders and congregations who, at some basic level, interpret scripture to mean ‘love your neighbor...no matter what and no matter who’. Some of these congregations are what is referred to as open and affirming (meaning that they actively and openly welcome members of the LGBTQ community to not only participate in worship but also leadership). Others are still trying to discern where their particular comfort level lies, but in the meantime are going to fall on the side of being open to trusting a God who will lead them in service in ways that might stretch their understanding of just how diverse God’s love is.

On the other side are leaders and congregations who say, ‘if you are a ‘practicing’ member of the LGBTQ community or support those who are, we don’t want to be in relationship with you because we feel you are either unrepentant sinners or are enabling unrepentant sinners to remain in that place of sinfulness.

Both sides read the same scriptures and how they interpret them are dramatically different.

Well, as I have experienced this divided over the last year, those who are in the latter description set up an atmosphere where if you did not agree with them, then you were some variation of a heretic. In responding to this environment, the denomination created a committee (because that’s what we do) that would give a recommendation to the denomination meeting in June of 2020 providing council as to how the RCA should move forward. The general options: break up, stay together, or radically restructure, and yes, if you have looked at your email recently, and were trying to figure out what the survey that I sent you is talking about....well, this is what it’s talking about.

And again, I absolutely believe that there are people in the denomination who have taken the stance that if you don’t agree with them (and their interpretation of scripture)...then you need to get out.

Something along these lines was also manifesting itself in the Corinthian church.

In some way, a hierarchy of acceptability was being formed that said unless you were serving God this way, or celebrated God that way, that you were, in fact, doing it wrong. Think about what that may have looked like: on one side of the room you have a group of people, probably led by a select few people, who are thinking that the folks on the other side of the room are, in some way, heretical.

When that sort of mentality exists in a community, what normally happens?

Unfortunately, the people who are on the other side of the room gather themselves together to both defend their perspective, but also to point out the 'faults' of the first group. This back and forth, tit for tat continues to escalate to the point that, eventually, the two sides can't be in the same room at all.

This is why Paul says, "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."

For Paul, the diversity of gifts, service, and activity show, not how people are getting it wrong, but how majestic the movement of God's Spirit really is. The glory of God is not necessarily based in the uniformity of thought and practice, but in the diversity of ways that God is able to lead people to be the light of the world.

Now that sort of thought can be real easy to hear and say, 'yup, I can go with that'. The problem is when the intellectual thought hits the practical world, because when the rubber hits the road, it's amazing how many folks realize just how difficult the thought can be to implement, regardless of how important it may be to do so.

For example, most people are able to recognize when something like the hymnal needs to be replaced. That's not the problem. The issues show up when the new hymnal is finally selected...or when the worship leadership feels led to start singing hymns that aren't even in the hymnal and we start singing those hymns off of the screens in the front of the sanctuary. All of a sudden new hymns are being sung, and old familiar ones aren't sung as often any more. Think of how many disagreements you have heard of this sort of issue.

Back in December, a colleague of mine recounted a story where it was two minutes prior to worship, that time when chaos seems to reign, when a parishioner came up to him with a very serious look on her face. She asked him, "do you have a second?" In a distracted fashion he fired back, assuming that she had a late announcement to make mention of, or an addition to the prayer list, "yup, but you've got to make it quick." She looked at him, totally serious, and said, "can you make sure that this year's Christmas Eve service has hymns that we know? I can't handle another service like last year's." One minute before worship and completely serious. She was focused on her point of view and was unable to see the Spirit of God working in new and different ways.

In that vein, I remember another colleague talking about a time that he was captive in the dentist's chair, and the hygienist was asking what he did. He said he was a pastor, to which she said, "Oh, I'm looking for a new church". Thinking that he might be able to help out, he asked, "what sort of a church are you looking for? Where have you gone before?" She told him the

church and said, "I'm looking for a place that is full of the Spirit." He looked at her with a confused face because he knew the place she mentioned to be a place that specialized in contemporary worship music; a place that was described by many as, 'full of the Spirit', and asked, so what was wrong with your previous church?" "Her response? "The band wasn't good enough." She was focused on her point of view and was unable to see the Spirit of God working in new and different ways.

While these two examples might have caused us to laugh for a moment, all of us can think of times where one person, or one way of thinking forces a community of faith to splinter, or at the very least, become divisive. Pastors or leaders who create a particular line of thought or practice and if you don't live up to that bar, then you're wrong and you're out.

### **RCA 2020 Vision Group – RCA – what do we believe**

But that is not the sort of community of faith that Paul calls for us to accept. Paul is screaming out, "look at the unity that can be found in our diversity! God has created us with so many different skill sets and interests and all of these ways can show the light of our Lord. Put those different ways to the test, that's fine, but if the love and forgiveness of God is being exhibited then it is of God. The church is not ours: it is God's. Allow the Spirit of God, not your personal spirit, to be the delineator of what is right and what is wrong."

Especially this day, as we celebrate the commissioning of mission trip members, let us remember that we come from many different places, carrying with us many different experiences and many different ideas. This diversity is a good thing and shows to us over and over again how the Spirit of God is able to move, not just in one way, but in many ways, through many different ideas.

As we move into this new year and continue to ask the question of how is God calling us to serve, let us recognize that the answer that may come, may be difficult to swallow, because it is different than what we know.

However, just because we haven't done it that way before, doesn't mean that the way is not of the Spirit of God. While this may be our church home, always remember that it is, first and foremost, God's church and that our unity can and will be found as we serve in so many diverse ways.

### **After Sermon Prayer**

Holy Lord, it can be so easy to get our personal wants and desires wrapped up in what should be Your church. God, help us to recognize that Your will, Your Spirit can be expressed in a diverse number of ways, and it will be as we work together in that diversity that we will discover the unity that is found through Your Spirit in Your son, Jesus Christ.

### **Congregational Prayer**

We thank you, O God, for the blessing of life. We thank you for the celebration of worship and the hope for salvation that we have in you. We pray for those who do not know you, that they may receive the good news of Christ Jesus. We pray for those in leadership, that they may plan

with insight and perspective that lead to wise decisions.

We pray for those who are making important commitments, that they will receive power to see them through. We pray for those who are in need, that they receive the blessing of fulfillment.

We pray for those who need renewal, that they may receive the newness of spirit available in Christ. We pray for those who face embarrassment or shame, that the power of God may change shame to praise and embarrassment to celebration. We pray for those who need faith, that they may ask and believe. Lord, hear our prayer.

We approach You now with the prayers of this congregation as we pray for those listed in the bulletin. We also pause so that we might be able to come to You with all of the joys and concerns that we have carried with us here this morning. Lord, hear our prayers in the quiet of this place.

Lord, serving You is not always easy. It causes us to confront ideas that we might not be comfortable with, and even disagree with. And yet, if we mold our lives to Your will, we will be able to discover that in the multitude of these diverse ways, Your Spirit is at work. Lord, help us to live out this truth, here, now, and forevermore. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.