

## 1 Corinthians 12.1-11

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I don't know if I've mentioned it before, but you should probably know that Paul is not my favourite. So much of what he says is just so... out there. It's strange and hard to read, let alone make any sense of. Mary Hinkle Shore describes reading Paul's letters as similar to eavesdropping on one side of a telephone call. Because this is a specific reply to a specific group of people regarding a very specific situation.

In this particular letter, Paul is responding to a report from "Chloe's people" and answering questions about worship practices, and ethical behaviour. This letter likely would have been dictated to a scribe, and where possible sent with a trusted person to its final destination. Upon arrival, it would have been read aloud for the entire congregation.

This particular congregation was founded by Paul in years past. Since he has been away, they have fallen to infighting. Now, the people have divided themselves according to loyalty to certain leaders, interpretation of ethical behaviour, social status and spiritual gifts. Paul may have been writing to and about a specific place and time, but when it is described like that, it sure feels a lot like our place and time.

In this letter, we are offered a window onto a church people trying to sort out the life implications of faith - how should Christians live in a culture that is at odds with what they believe and proclaim? What commitments and practices enable us, as Christians, to honour one another in the midst of difference of opinion?

The Corinthians are focusing on rank and status, claiming spiritual sophistication and superiority, which is why Paul redirects them to the common good. He does it so well, too. He doesn't call them out, telling them that they are wrong, putting them on the defensive. He uses tact and the grace about which he preaches, and invites them into a conversation to better understand. This is definitely one of those times when we could take a lesson or two from Paul.

He names their diversity as their strength. In fact, he insists on it.

*There are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit,  
and there are varieties services, the same One is served,  
and there are varieties of activities, but the same God activates them in everyone.  
To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

Some might say that variety is the spice of life. It is the strength of the church, according to Paul.

Look at us here a Scarboro: we have three candidates for ministry in our midst.

Joe, as a diaconal student, and Cindy and Charles who we will covenant with today, promising to support them as they enter into their studies for ordination. These are three very different people, each of them is uniquely gifted, and called to live into that giftedness for the greater good.

So it is with each of us.

The gifts that Paul names, are in no particular order, and not limited to:

- wise counsel;
- clear understanding;
- simple trust;
- healing;
- miraculous acts;
- prophecy;
- discernment;
- tongues; and
- interpretation of tongues

We are each gifted. Maybe with one of the above, maybe with something else. Maybe it's something that we haven't been able to recognize yet. There might be some of us that feel worthless or powerless. But Paul writes to tell us - Jesus lived and died to tell us, I'm here to tell you, that you are important, you have worth and value, you are both gifted and a gift.

How can we tell?

I once had someone ask me how I knew I was called to ministry. I asked her how she knew how she was called to teaching, and she said "don't say it like that, it makes it sound more important." But it is important.

In response to this idea, Yung Suk Kim states "The Spirit does not promote excessive individualism or flagrant elitism that does not edify the whole community." Put another way, the purpose of our different gifts of/from/through the Spirit is to make the church stronger and useful to more people. That is an idea that really struck with me. What do we have to offer to make this group, this place stronger, but also more useful.

Because, to be honest, I think a lot about how to build a strong community, but haven't tended to pay a lot of attention to being useful. It's a helpful reminder. How often do we look at the strengths of this place, these people, and forget that these are not spiritual "things" to be owned and praised, but gifts that are entrusted to us? How can we use those gifts to serve God and God's world?

When the world seems divided, when we are separated by one another from our algorithms and online echo chambers, we must recognize other kinds of gifts and cooperate with one another. If you are searching for concrete examples of how to do this, I would recommend checking out the Calgary Alliance for the Common Good, or the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

The purpose of the Calgary Alliance for the Common Good is to:

- Create a network involving people from diverse religious, non-profit, labour, neighbourhood and ethnic groups to foster meaningful relationships with each other and their respective communities.
- Develop leaders who can promote healthy and effective civic life
- Effectively address the key justice issues facing Calgary
- Harness the voice and the power of the people of Calgary to transform our city by addressing the systems, policies, and underlying causes of poverty and injustice.

Our church is a member of this Alliance and so we are attempting to use our gifts and strengths in cooperation with others, to work for the common good.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, is just as it sounds. Except it is actually eight days, in which we worship with others who claim different traditions and worship practices. We come together and get to know one another, have conversations. We learn about other places and expressions of faith in the world. This year, our theme and materials are prepared by folks in Indonesia who are asking us to focus on justice.

For something a little less specific, I suggest that we try the following.

We start with a prompting from the Spirit, a sense of purpose.

We continue Jesus' work, pointing toward the one that we follow.

With God's guidance, we proclaim and build up goodness.

We live in and celebrate grace, giving thanks for such a gift.

Consider your gifts. Where do you use them?