

## 1 Corinthians 12:1-13

The apostle to the nations, Paul of Tarsus, is arguably the second most influential figure in all of Christendom, second to Jesus himself. Some people esteem him as a theological genius whose ministry helped move Christianity from a small Jewish sect to the worldwide faith it would become today. And some of us may have trouble with Paul because there are some passages that have been used to oppress people. But today I want to look at Paul, not as the theologian or apostle, but as a human being trying to do the best he can do with the many churches he served. Particularly a most difficult church.

Paul began as Saul, and he was a Pharisee who according to the book of Acts worked hard to squash this new Jewish separatist group called Christians. If you watched the Mandalorian, this group actually said “this is the way.” Acts 9:2 says Saul wanted to go to Damascus “so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” But on the way to Damascus he had a vision that left him blind for three days. And with that, Saul was a changed man. He would soon go by the name Paul and then begin a ministry that would take him all over the Roman Empire. Michael Gorman, a Pauline scholar says that if the

book of Acts is correct, Paul would have traveled over 10,000 miles in his career. Exaggeration or not, Paul was fully committed newfound call with conviction and integrity.

Now Paul ministered to many congregations. These would have been house churches, small assemblies that stayed connected. But no church gave Paul more problems than the church in Corinth. Historians note that Corinth in Paul's day was a revitalized city under emperor Julius Caesar. It had been devastated when it was taken over by Rome in 146 BC but in 44 AD, Julius invested in the colony and it became a hub for freed slaves, immigrants, skilled labor force, and other poor to middle class peoples. There were also those who became wealthy or from the elite class due to business adventures rather than inherited riches. I like to think of Corinth as the equivalent to Atlanta, Georgia. A city that has come up in the last 20 years. Atlanta is also a diverse city. In the deep south, it is a place of opportunity and inclusion for Black and LBGTQ folks to live and thrive despite the oppressive systems that surround them. My sister and her husband being ones to relocate and establish themselves for such reasons.

So Corinth was a diverse city. And the church in Corinth reflected that diversity. And with so many differences, the church of Corinth was Paul's most difficult ministry sans maybe his arguing with Peter in the book of

Galatians over Jewish and Christian identity. Paul writes 2 long letters in an attempt to unite the squabbling members of the Corinthian assembly. Just in 1 Corinthians alone, Paul addresses people divided over which apostle to follow, an adulterous affair between a man and his father's wife, there is a whole thing about eating food sacrificed to Roman gods, a weird verse about head coverings that if taken out of context can be harmful to women, and then closer to the end we get this chapter on spiritual gifts. Which gifts show that you have the Holy Spirit and which ones are fake??

So let's just dive a little deeper into this text, if you have a Bible at home feel free to follow along, but I want us to see a few things that are at play here and then we'll see how this connects to our current state of affairs.

Verse 1-3, Paul is essentially stating that if you are a Christian you have the Holy Spirit. Full stop. The fighting and division was so bad, that members were questioning who has the spirit in them? If we are all claiming "that Jesus is Lord" then we all have the Holy Spirit within us, which means we all have spiritual gifts. Verses 4-11 seek to give examples of the different manifestations of the spirit. But they all come from the same spirit. The text reads:

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are variety 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.”

Ah here we are. The Common Good. When addressing the spiritual gifts, this is the reason Paul gives for why we have spiritual gifts in the first place. Now how does one define the Common Good. The Markula center for applied Ethics at Santa Clara University has this to say about the Common Good:

“The common good is a notion that originated over two thousand years ago in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. More recently, the ethicist John Rawls defined the common good as "certain general conditions that are...equally to everyone's advantage". The Catholic religious tradition, which has a long history of struggling to define and promote the common good, defines it as "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment." The common good, then, consists primarily of having the social systems, institutions, and

environments on which we all depend, work in a manner that benefits all people.”

The text continues with this caveat:

“the common good does not just happen. Establishing and maintaining the common good require the cooperative efforts of some, often of many, people. Just as keeping a park free of litter depends on each user picking up after himself, so also maintaining the social conditions from which we all benefit requires the cooperative efforts of citizens”

This idea of a common good sounds nice on paper but if it were easy then we would have a fair and just society today. But Paul is on to something with this idea striving of the common good. What we see in verses 8-10 are examples of the diverse ways in which the spirit shows up. Typically we only see them as spiritual gifts, abstract, ethereal, but I would argue that each gift Paul mentions gives incite to the kind of diversity Paul believed to be the body of Christ.

The utterance of wisdom is the one who has life’s experience to draw upon, knowledge may come from an educated person and education typical signifies a level of economic or social privilege especially in the greco-roman world, to another faith which is the results of systemic

oppression, trauma, and hardship, gifts of healing representing the naturally empathetic and compassionate. We all know someone like that, they have an endless well of active compassion which works for healing and justice. And then the issue of tongues, which I would interpret as the ones who have the ability to communicate across differing identities, cultures, and values.

You see, Paul, when he was struck down on the road to Damascus and had his conversion moment, he saw something in Jesus more than just a way to heaven or a way to have a good life. Paul saw a world-wide multi-cultural community of people from all stripes, shades, walks, and flocks of life.

He says in Verse 12 “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.”

Diversity is not for diversity sake. It is also not the erasure of our difference but it is the celebration of all the many ways we show up in life. The common good, especially for those of us who call ourselves christian

or follow “the way”, is only good if it benefits everyone, especially whom Jesus calls “the least among you.” I would add that the common good is not possible if liberation is not a part of the vision.

And that brings us to today. Tomorrow we celebrate the life and legacy of one of the greatest theologians Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. His dream of a diverse, inclusive, equitable, and just society that he called the beloved community, his vision of heaven on earth, or as Paul and many others have said a society for the common good. Sadly the King family has much trepidation about the coming holiday because we are facing a threat to all that Dr. King, representative John Lewis, Ella baker, and so many others fought and died for.

We live in a divided country. I don't have to tell you that the polarization over our differing political ideologies is getting worse. It would seem that some politicians are more interested in power and money than governing, and then there are many who refuse to compromise on anything. At the one year anniversary of the historic failed coup of the government, we are witnessing the continued effort to move America away from a democracy and into an authoritative state. Political Scientist and CIA advisor Barbara F. Walter has written a book called “How Civil Wars Start”

in hopes to alert people to the violent dangers our political division and politics of resentment could take this nation.

It would seem Democracy as we know it is in peril. Not just because we can't agree on what the common good is but because many people truly believe that their way of life, their identity is the only good to be preserved.

So Can we save democracy? Is it even worth saving? Im sorry to disappoint you but despite the sermon title I can't give you a concrete answer. I am not a political scientist or sociologist. I am just a seminary student and musician and there are many more bright and wise people who understand geopolitics. However, as a follower of the way, which ever systems celebrates the diverse ways we show up in the world is the system I want to support. The folks who seek to hold up everyone's right to vote, right to choose, and right to human dignity, are the people and institutions I want to lift up.

This work of the common good is not easy. Paul definitely had to get his hands dirty. We may have to do as the book Ashley read for us tells us and SAY SOMETHING. That may be in protest, that also may also mean

building relationships with those who have different values than your own. Difficult to do. Religion and politics must not be taboo subjects to avoid debate but the topic that invokes deep listening and a compassionate response. True gifts of the spirit.

War and violence only breed more resentment and hate. Dr.MLK is famously known for saying that hate can not drive out hate but only love can do that.

Before I end, I want to return to Paul, as I said not the theologian, but the human being. Paul used violence in his attempt to settle the conflicting ideologies within his jewish tradition. But it was his experience with the divine, whom we call love, that changed his heart. Human beings, as stubborn and habitual as we are, can change through the power of love. Ask a recovering addict, ask a former white supremacist, the many people who were once homophobic or transphobic but as culture has moved have changed with the times. I am not dismissing the harm that was done but I am saying that change is possible through the many gifts of the spirit.

I believe we are called to use our many, different spiritual gifts, that is the our diverse identities, abilities, and characteristics, to ensure that every voice is heard, to make black lives matter a reality, to protect trans and gay

kids from abandonment, to care for the poorest among us, to change our enemy into a friend, and to work for the common good of beloved community. That is what is truly worth saving.

Amen.