

“A Question of Gifts”

(First of three sermons on “The Corinthian Questions”)

I Corinthians 12:1-11

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Today we begin a three-part series entitled “The Corinthian Questions.” As I begin, let me invite you to turn to the map on the very last page of your pew Bible, as I will shortly talk you through the geography of Corinth, Greece. But why this series? First, I have not preached from Paul’s letters in a while and these readings are the Epistle over the next three weeks. Second, I enjoy the in-depth teaching and spiritual formation of a series. While each message will stand alone, they will also build on one another and those who attend each week, or follow them on-line, will have a richer experience of Christ’s good news. Third, the themes in these readings are universal: spiritual gifts, Christian community and love. Fourth, while the themes ARE universal, they are ALSO quite timely for THIS congregation at THIS particular time. We are poised for growth. With growth comes change. And with change comes the need to be increasingly attentive to these themes and their context. So let us look at the context of the Corinthian Church and, with it, today’s message, “A Question of Gifts.”

Look now at the Bible map. Corinth was a port city in Greece, destroyed in 146 B.C. and rebuilt by Julius Caesar as a Roman colony in 44 B.C. Within a generation (27 B.C.) it had grown to be the seat of the governor of the province of Achaëa (central and southern Greece). After a century, 44 A.D., Achaëa had become a senatorial province with direct representation in the Roman Senate.

By the time of Paul, A.D. 50, Corinth had achieved strategic economic importance because of its location on the east-to-west commercial route. Specifically, it was part of a metropolitan region that included the harbor of Lecheion on the Gulf of Corinth two miles to the east; and the port of Cenchreae on the Gulf of Saros 6 miles to the west. Across this land isthmus goods were trans-shipped so that mariners could avoid the dangerous voyage around Cape Malea, the southern

promontory of Greece. Sometimes vessels were dragged on rollers across this narrow strip of land; or cargoes were transshipped from one port to another via wagons. A canal was attempted under Emperor Nero in A.D. 66-67 but would have to wait until the 1800's.

Corinth was the wealthiest and most important city in Greece at this time, with a population, including the two ports, of about 600,000.

The city was a natural stopping point for mariners and merchants while goods got across the isthmus. As a crossroads it was a place diverse in people and cultures. Corinth was the "city of Aphrodite," the Greek goddess of love and beauty from whom we have the term "aphrodisiac," a food or drug that arouses sexual desire. With it came a reputation for sexual immorality, emphasized by jealous Athenians but still deserved. It is easy to understand the rise of the proverb among Mediterranean sailors, "Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth."

St. Paul's second and third missionary journeys took him to Corinth, where he founded the Christian church about A.D. 50. One might say "What a place to found a church!" On the other hand, Paul rightly recognized that in just such a place is the church most needed. He spent 18 months there, second longest after his two and ½ years in Ephesus. Paul's letters of I and II Corinthians were to guide the church after he continued on his missionary journeys.

The diversity earlier described also affected the Corinthians spiritually. By the tenth verse of his letter he addresses divisions within the church. Some profess loyalty to him; some to Apollos, the apostle who built on Paul's work; some to Peter, who may have personally gone, or sent emissaries, to Corinth; and a faction professing loyalty to Christ, implying the others did not. Other matters of division were smugness about knowledge (ch. 2), sexual morals and immorality in the church (chpts. 5-7), lawsuits among the believers (ch. 6), idol worship (ch. 8), and gluttony at the Lord's Supper (ch. 11). I mention these divisions, certainly a series of messages in themselves, because they set the framework for understanding the Corinthian church's divisiveness around spiritual gifts.

Please turn now to I Corinthians 12, pg. 1046, if you wish to follow along. In the first three verses of today's reading, Paul emphasizes that spiritual gifts are an outward expression of an inward spirit, the Spirit of God. If one has God's Spirit, then one will not speak ill of God. Conversely, one can only profess the ancient creed, *Christe Kyrie*, ("Jesus is Lord"), if one has God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, within.

Out of the unifying spirit of God comes the recognition that each one has a gift. The gift itself is not the source of spiritual power, but (vs. 6) "*the same God who activates all of them in everyone.*" Now pay attention: this statement was dramatic for its first hearers. It emphasized monotheism, the sovereignty of a single God to whom fidelity is due, and therefore differentiated early Christianity from the pagan world around it. While Corinth was the city of Aphrodite, the temple that occupied the city square was to Apollo; and the official deity was Poseidon, the god of the sea. Scholars also know that there were altars in the city to Hermes, Artemis (at whose temple in Ephesus Paul's preaching started a riot), Zeus, Dionysus and Heracles.

In addition to emphasizing God's sovereignty, the theology of gifts linked the value of each individual to the value of God. To have a gift ***from*** God is to be valued ***by*** God. We may take this for granted but in the first century it was radical. Paul himself says (1:26) that those to whom he ministers were not wise or powerful by human standards, or of noble birth. In a society built on class structure, this emphasis was revolutionary. And because the power of the gift comes from God and not the gift itself, there is an implied equality among the members of the community. This implication sets the stage for next week's reading and the metaphor of Christian community as Christ's body that is its subject.

So what? What does this mean for us? While Milford does not reflect the cosmopolitan diversity of Corinth, we are far more diverse than one thinks. Social, economic and educational diversity are very much a part of this church. I also think our desire to welcome people regardless of sexual orientation; and our capacity to serve children with special needs, also adds to our diversity.

That diversity is a gift. Married to it, I believe, are three gifts that I see among us out of five described by Bishop Schnase in his book Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. A few of you became familiar with this book when Rev. Carle was your pastor, and it is a book I hope we will re-visit as we consider planning for the future. The gifts I see, in varying degrees of development, are radical hospitality, risk-taking mission and extravagant generosity. Look at today's notices with an eye to how often they mention table fellowship and service to others. Less visible may be extravagant generosity, although we just completed an annual campaign and budget with an over 35% increase while continuing to ask for and receive—looking at today's program—paper goods, clothes hangers, soup and dental supplies. Wow. WOW!

This level of giving, serving and welcoming, though, has a weak spot in it. Who thinks they might know what it is? While there may be many answers, the one that I keep hearing in prayer is “listening.” Do we listen to, and truly hear, one another? Sometimes. Sometimes not. The challenge, you see, is that when we are champions for whatever we are champions for, we are not always engaging the person who doesn't understand; who isn't there yet; who is at a different place on the journey; or who—perish the thought—may not even agree or see as a priority that which we do. It is said that we have two ears and one mouth so that we will do twice as much listening as speaking. I wonder if a growing edge for us is to marry our gifts with a yearning to listen—to God and to one another—for how the Spirit might lead us and welcome new ideas, new people, new ministries among us.

Then, too, do we know what our gifts are? If not, are we willing to find out? If we do know, do we use it? That is, in the words of Wesley's covenant prayer we used four weeks ago, “*to be employed for thee or laid aside for thee.*” Pushing a little harder, do we really believe that each person—each person—has a gift which reflects our unity in God? There is a temptation, one that next week's passage better addresses, to rank certain gifts as more important; and, at times, to think that some do not even have a gift. Such ranking introduces a hierarchy that is the way of the world but not the way of Christ. Verse 7: “*To*

each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” Our gifts manifest God’s Holy Spirit. To say anything else is to move into pride, that destroys communities and individuals in a heartbeat. Let me speak personally: I am not a great preacher. No one invited me to speak this year at the Festival of Homiletics in Nashville. I am a decent preacher who occasionally has a good day. And when I do, and one of you says generous words about the message, I try always to say, “To God be the glory” or “Thanks be to God.” This is not rhetoric. Yes, I work hard at bringing a good message. But in the end it is God’s Gospel and God’s message. To God be the glory and woe to me if I forget that.

For us the challenge is seeing in every neighbor the one Spirit, the Spirit of God, who entrusts us with a gift. This reflects how much God values us, to so entrust us with a gift to be used for holy purpose. The blessing is to find, claim and use the gift for the glory of God, who knits us together in unity by the same Spirit. For this challenge and opportunity, let the church say, “Thanks be to God.”