

Bruton Parish Church  
The Third Sunday of Epiphany  
The Rev'd Dr. Daniel W. McClain  
January 27, 2019

For the last two weeks, members of the Canterbury student group have been reading and discussing Paul's treatise on the gifts of the Spirit as part of our weekly Bible study. I've loved this conversation and have heard some thoughtful and heartfelt observations and questions, as well as some confusion over some of the more novel and charismatic of the spiritual gifts.

I admit that I don't always know what to do with the exotic and miraculous in this corner of the Bible.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians witnesses to extraordinary activity, from speaking in tongues and prophesying to healing and deeds of power.

And yet, while the Corinthian church appears to be ripe with spiritual flair, it also seems to be a church ripe with conflict, misunderstanding, and misconduct.

What was their problem? How could they have been in such disarray when they were so full of the Spirit?

Well, there's something funny about gifts. Sometimes it's all too easy to forget the giver.

Anyone who has been through Christmas with small children, anyone who was once a child recalls how quickly the exciting about getting eclipses the gratitude for the giver. In fact, it's not unusual for this syndrome to manifest itself weeks before Christmas.

I don't mean to pick on children here. I think we adults often model this behavior. It's all too human to forget: to forget how much of a gift time is, or health, or even life itself — to simply take it all for granted.

It's no different with the Holy Spirit, the greatest of all gifts.

Paul wants the Corinthians to see that however amazing and powerful their spiritual gifts might be, they all come from the same source, the same Giver, the Holy Spirit.

And he wants them to see that there's a unity in the gifts themselves. The gifts bear the marks of the giver.

And somehow, the unity which flows from the giver must unify not only the gifts, but those that receive the gifts.

So, to help them see this unity, he offers them the metaphor of the body.

—In fact, in this short passage, Paul uses a handful of related metaphors—

Because they are all baptized by the same Spirit, they are now members of the same body. But like any healthy body, this is a body that comprises a diversity of members. Not everyone is a hand; not everyone is an eye. You get the picture.

Rather, because it is the Spirit that makes us members of this body, it's also the Spirit that makes us whatever member we are.

It's easy to hear in this passage a kind of blanket approval for our diverse personalities or preferences or opinions. See, I'm a member of this political party. Or, well, I don't particularly care for them over there. Or, well, I'm not comfortable with public speaking so...

And because we're part of a diverse, pluralistic body, we think this kind of tolerance is ok. I'm free to continue being me, indulging in my affiliations, preferences, and anxieties.

But no, that's not what Paul is getting at. And frankly, I think Paul couldn't care less about fostering that kind of diversity; he's just entirely dismissed ethnic, nationalistic, and sexual difference.

No, the only diversity Paul seems to care about is how we are diverse because of the gifts we have received from the Spirit. The Spirit empowers each of us to do different things.

And why? Because it takes a variety of skills, capacities, strengths, and understandings to carry out the one mission of the Spirit. It takes each one of us to be open to whatever gift the Spirit is giving us to do the work that God has given the Church in the Holy Spirit.

And that work, friends, is the good news this morning. God is committed to the reconciliation of all of creation to God. And God has called each one of, each one of us, and has offered each one of us gifts through the Holy Spirit because God invites us to be part of that work too.

So the questions for all of us this morning is: am I listening to that calling? Have I discerned what that gift is from the Spirit? Am I committed to employing that gift as the member of a unified Church?

I invite you to offer up those questions as a prayer this morning. But I warn you, God will answer.