

Nothing Stands Alone
2 Corinthians 3:1-6, 12-
Sermon by Rev. Maria-Pia Seirup
Transfiguration Sunday
Woodbury UMC
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Have you ever written a letter of recommendation for someone? Or have you asked someone to write one for yourself, and then wondered what did they write? I've always considered it an honor to write letters of recommendation ... One of the things I think about is what are the person's gifts? How are they are putting their gifts to good use as well as how I see those gifts fitting in with whatever organization it may be?

In our scripture today, Paul is saying that the Corinthians Are his letter of recommendation. The Corinthians are living proof of the good work Paul is doing to spread the Gospel message. Paul says he is not boasting, he is commending the people for being steadfast followers of Jesus Christ. He is holding up the Corinthian Christian community as an example of overcoming their divisions, and embracing the transformative power of the Gospel. In short, the community itself is Paul's letter of recommendation as he travels from one town to another planting new churches. It took courage for the Corinthians to step out in faith to follow Paul and the Gospel. They embraced change even in the face of persecution and formed a vibrant community that we are still reading about more than 2,000 years later. No wonder

Paul was writing a letter of appreciation and encouragement to them.

So I ask you, as a congregation: **what will your letter of recommendation say? What will your legacy be?**

Holy Spirit, reign in me so that the words I share today reflect what you would have us hear. Stir in each of us a burning desire to know God's will and carry it out to help transform our hurting world. Amen.

This morning I'd like to talk about what it might have taken for the Corinthians to become such a vital and impactful community of faith and what we might learn from them.

I can imagine Paul out in the town square preaching the good news and attracting a small band of followers at first. By the time Paul wrote his second letter, the Corinthians were already a small community church. As we hear in the passage today, Paul was proud of them. He celebrates them by pointing out how they opened their hearts to the transforming work of the Spirit. The new covenant is written on their hearts by the Spirit of the Living God. Paul describes the confidence and freedom he and the Corinthians have received from Jesus Christ. Not like Moses and the Israelites whose hearts were hardened and a veil remained over their faces

Then Paul writes *“when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed, “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image”*.

The confidence and boldness to act comes from God through Jesus Christ. But first, the Corinthians had to choose to follow Paul and his message of freedom through Jesus Christ. It wasn't an easy go for the Corinthians. Their times were not unlike our times today. They had to resist fake news – or false prophets as they put it in their day, they had to let go of their former ways: their allegiance to a variety of gods, pagan rituals, corrupt practices and cut-throat competition and make space for a new way of life based on faith, hope and love.

Paul had a vision and ways to fulfill that vision. Paul knew it would take each and every one of his followers participating in building a strong community that could thrive and grow. Paul taught his followers that God had given everyone Spiritual Gifts meant to be used for the building up of each other and establishing a beloved community.

Pastor Michael is following in Paul's footsteps teaching you all about spiritual gifts through his sermons and inviting me to lead the workshop he and your friends just completed.

THIS gifts business is FOR EVERYONE – introverts and extroverts, people at all stages of their lives, it is not a spectator sport – everyone needs to be on the playing field. It is not a time for false modesty saying “oh, someone else can do that better than me.” It is not a time for fear; fear of stepping out of your comfort zone, fear of change, fear of failure and so on. As Paul says to the Philippians “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me ... “

God gave us these special gifts to use to build each other up – not to boast and puff ourselves up. But Paul warns that First and foremost, Love needs to be infused into all we do. Love never fails. If we do not have love, we are nothing. When we feel loved, we are more open to accepting new challenges, our creativity flows, and we act with more openness and compassion toward others. We are more confident and we can act with boldness.

We are the body of Christ. What we do as individuals matters and what we do as a community matters even more. Aristotle the ancient Greek philosopher, recognized this by saying “The whole is great than the sum of its parts.”

Richard Rohr illuminates this reality by explaining that nothing stands alone. God created the universe with intertwined and complementary parts – our natural world and us humans depend upon each other and are affected by each other. When we stand

together in love, our impact moves the world in a positive direction.

Paul was a realist as well as a visionary leader. He understood that change is difficult. Letting go is difficult. When we become comfortable in the way things are, and when we can't see what is coming next, sometimes we hold on even tighter, like Moses and the Israelites continuing to hide behind the veil. Yet when we make the bold choice to get out of the bleachers and go onto the field, The Spirit can infuse us with such hope that nothing holds us back.

After listening to Pastor Michael's sermon on Spiritual Gifts and the Disney film *Encanto*, I just had to see the movie for myself. The story holds a powerful message about individual gifts, community and transformation. It is a story of what happens when members of the community are not allowed to use their gifts in the ways they were intended by God. The villain's heart was finally pierced by love. As family members experienced freedom to realize their gifts and use them well, new life was breathed into the family and the whole village was transformed.

We only have to look at our world situation today and see what happens when people become divided and disconnected.

Sometimes it all seems so overwhelming. Where do we find hope? Just as the Corinthians did, We find hope in the plan God has mapped out for us.

You may be wondering why you each received a puzzle piece when you came in this morning. The puzzle piece illustrates the unique set of gifts that God gave you to use. Use your puzzle piece as God intends and you will help build the beloved community God has called us to become together.

How do we find out where we fit in this puzzle? First, by seeing ourselves as God sees us: gifted and empowered by the Spirit. We discover our God given gifts, not just by looking at what you are good at necessarily, but what fills you up to overflowing? What is it that makes you feel alive, confident and anxious to share with others?

As you are discovering your gifts, I encourage you to spend time getting to know each other on a different level. As you discover your own gifts and learn about the diversity of gifts God has given others, I am confident that you will be filled with energy from the Holy Spirit and just naturally be excited to share your gifts with each other. I encourage you to come together to discover how each of your puzzle pieces fit together.

What are the gifts of your congregation? You could consider such questions as What do you want your church to be known for 5 years down the road, 10 years down the road. What would you like to be your legacy to be? Above all, remember that LOVE is the glue that holds the puzzle pieces together.

My husband, Peter is here today. He leads a helping hands ministry at Jesse Lee called the Spirit Builders. Peter has seen amazing things happen when he checks his ego at the door when working on Spirit Builders' projects— He believes this is what Jesus meant when he said you have to lose your life in order to gain it. He gets so exhilarated working with people who are granted different pieces of the puzzle than he has. Peter says I laugh out loud when one of them shows me the way when I am struggling. I laugh even louder when I thought I had the answer and yet someone else shows me a better way. It is such a hoot to be gifted by each other for the good of all.

I encourage you to be open to diversity of all kinds, newcomers of all ages, different styles of leadership, different ideas of what the “right” way is, and refrain from “but we’ve always done it this way”. New members will bring new energy and add to the vitality of your church, if you welcome them with love and leave your skepticism and egos behind. As John Wesley said. In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty and in all things charity.

You don't have to go it alone. You have a dynamic new Pastor willing to lead and work alongside you. I've known Michael for over 20 years. He is a man dedicated to building up others, and working together for a more just and compassionate world. He is a man who Been through challenging situations and has managed each one with grace and integrity.

Sometimes it will mean taking a risk, or as Peter said checking your ego at the door, and letting someone else put their puzzle piece in place. I guarantee, with the help of the Holy Spirit, you will laugh and rejoice at what wonders can be accomplished. Jesus promises new life – we are all working to resurrect our churches as we've gone dormant in many ways during the pandemic. Holding on to old ways of how we worship, of how we do Bible or book studies may not be what is going to help us be vital congregations, positioned well to help our hurting world in greater ways.

Our United Methodist denomination is going to divide in the next year or two. People are wondering already what do we Methodists stand for? What are the special gifts of our congregation? What is our vision for our congregation? If each of our churches can answer these questions, particularly yes to the essentials and in all things diversity? I believe the new church that emerges will be in a good position to help ourselves stay firmly planted in love and we will be able to turn outward and serve our deeply hurting and divided world.

We have a unique opportunity coming out of the isolation of this pandemic. Nothing is the same as it was. And we've learned nothing stands alone. The pandemic has left nothing untouched. We are all in this together. We have the opportunity to shape our

future in new ways. We know we can do it. We are not alone ...
God is with us.

I look forward to seeing how you come together as a congregation and emerge from this period of social distancing. ... I look forward to learning what new ways you are making an impact on the wider community; your letter of recommendation. Margaret Mead, the famous 20th century anthropologist said “**Never underestimate the power of a small group of committed people to change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has.**” By God’s grace, and with the power of the Holy Spirit, I hope you will seize this opportunity.

Let us pray. *Holy One, On this Transfiguration Sunday, open our hearts and minds so that we might be transformed into your likeness more and more. May we shine brightly and lead the way as you lead us. Inspire us to use our gifts to bring about your kingdom here on earth. Amen*