

Every Contribution Builds the Body
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Third Sunday after Epiphany
Woodbury UMC
January 23, 2022

I did a Google search on “fairy tale” and the words ”the little” and lots came up. It suggested the little mermaid, little prince, little red hen, little match girl, little engine that could. There is a long tradition of this, of course. The Bible goes in this direction too, with David as the youngest son, not the oldest, yet he becomes king, and on and on. The members of the body that seem weakest are indispensable. Any fairy tale will tell you this.

The text this week is in the line of “the last shall be first, and the first shall be last” with its vision of a topsy turvy world. We have a text to engage that is focused pretty squarely on two related things — that in Christ, the values of the world are turned topsy Turvey, and that this is intended to translate to a leveling of the playing field.

Last week I started a series of sermons on spiritual gifts, noting that last Sunday tied in with the United Methodist Human Relations Day, encouraging us to financially care for those at risk.

I also spoke about the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I also noted that the scripture this week picks up immediately after the scripture last week, that I’d be continuing to preach about spiritual giftedness this week, and so it may be appropriate to continue the theme with another observation from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to get things going:

“In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects

one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be... This is the inter-related structure of reality.” (Letter from a Birmingham Jail)

This is remarkably similar to what John Wesley said when he wrote these words:

Solitary religion is not to be found there. “Holy Solitaries” is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than Holy Adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. Faith working by love, is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection.

Wesley had a way with words — if you weren’t paying attention, you probably heard Holy Adulterers and immediately started paying closer attention!

Last week we began with 1 Corinthians 12:1-11: Spiritual gifts are from God, and there are a variety. This week we continue with 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a, as we explore that spiritual gifts and the church itself are diverse and interdependent on one another.

We forget how radical this is!

A few weeks ago, when the scripture was about John the Baptist, and the circumstances of the baptism of Jesus as recorded in John’s Gospel, I suggested that you might see something new in your Bible if you don’t read what it said literally. I hope you did, because you can see a lot in your Bible if you don’t insist on reading it literally. Of course, that is not a universal. Some of it is literal. There is a lot of the Bible that very much IS meant to be read literally. I hope you don’t take my words out of contexts, just like you shouldn’t take scripture out of context — not equating my words with scripture by any means, but instead noting that in most cases you won’t get the full sense of what someone wants to tell you without a little context. The context in which Paul lived and wrote is one of ethnic segregation, of religious

identity that separates, of slavery being commonplace, of Roman occupation, of tribalism. You stick to your own people if you know what's good for you. Paul's readers would have taken all of that for granted, because that is just how the world works.

And he obliterates all of that in just a few words.

No Jew or Greek, no slave or free! If you take that literally, it says that your legal classification, your nationality, your ethnicity, your economic status — every bit of that is affected by our being united in Christ, our drinking of one spirit. You can quibble about whether to read that as these divisions are obliterated, or you can also read that as saying your allegiance to Christ comes first and is more important than any other allegiance you will ever have.

Family is identity, and Christians call each other brother and sister. Society is male dominated and thoroughly patriarchal, and Christians refer to God as a holy Father. Do we really believe that? What comes close in our context?

Even if we see this as speaking solely to Christians - how often do we claim as our family the members of the Christian body who are in prison, or waiting for asylum at the border, or live under oppressive occupation in Palestine, or whose children are working in factories in Bangladesh. It is just as radical today to declare the Spirit baptizes us into one body as it was at the time of Paul. One body. American or developing world, gay or straight, documented or undocumented, incarcerated or free, gender conforming or non-cis, rural or intercity... what else would you add? So let's look at what else Paul writes in his letter to the young church in Corinth:

12:29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 12:30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

So — we are not the same, and some are considered more important than others. What does it look like when we treat the lesser members of the church, community or business hierarchy with greater honor? They receive greater honor specifically because they are equally indispensable, but are rarely-if-ever-acknowledged for their commitment.

Let me repeat — we have heard this scripture so much that we forget how radical this is! This is because we all know that in the real world, wealth, power, authority, position and other ways of organizing some people as better than other people — that is already its own reward, right? If you have money and power, life is pretty good. When you come together in Christ, I read this as saying that those who do not have these things get preferential honor, get greater respect, because they don't get that respect anywhere else.

Look more closely. Paul isn't suggesting that we need to strip the powerful and the wealthy of what they have. Paul is simply noting the fact that the powerful and wealthy already have honor and respect, so let's give honor and respect to those who don't already have it. In fact, let's give honor and respect to those who will never get it any other way, because that's not how the world works.

I mentioned last week that this is a very powerful scripture and you might not look at it that way, because most of us have heard these again and again, and that familiarity makes them seem less threatening. If I advocate for people whose lives don't matter, and insist that they matter just as much as everyone else's life, people will become very uncomfortable. You must not point out that those who are counted as lesser might deserve special recognition simply as a matter of justice. I don't see any way to read this that isn't going to be seen as threatening to the order of the world.

Remember, we are talking about spiritual gifts, in order to better understand what has been given to this congregation so that we can better understand where God is calling

us. We may be debating what these spiritual gifts are, but I don't think any of us are doubting that some variety of gift has been given to us. By any measure, this is a gifted community. What are we supposed to do with that? Well, it looks like we are to join together with the entire body of Christ. I think it highly possible that It looks like we are to give honor to those parts that haven't been honored.

Are we to reach out to those in third world nations, those Christians who don't have the money we do, and help raise them up? Just this past week, I heard that 89% of the worldwide church is outside of the United States, and it is largely charismatic and pentecostal. Very different from us! I got that statistic from a 2020 podcast, and so I bet it is more by now.

We are so privileged that we are used to looking at everyone who has less than we do, and debating whether or not to help, and if so, how much. It is another thing to realize that if that is more than 90% of the Christian Church, then we might not be the top expression of Christianity. In our country, the Christian Church is shrinking, and we debate whether the church has any relevance to our lives. And in the rest of the world, the church is doing just fine without us, and will be just fine if we choose not to engage. We might be surprised at who they think of as spiritually impoverished and in need of special assistance, and they have more evidence on their side.

Will we be fine if we choose not to engage with the rest of the body? God only knows. It is humbling to have always thought of ourselves as the real church and everyone else as a variation, and then to realize that if we look at all of God's creation, we are not even close. We would do well to listen more to the minorities in our own midst, and to take them more seriously. After all, in the church, those who worship like us are very much in the minority, and we hope the others will accept us, right?

Some of you are uncomfortable. I thank you for sticking around anyway. After all, I told you more than once that this is radical stuff, and the time between the writing and our hearing hasn't dulled it one bit. All of that said, where do we go from here?

It is always a good idea to go back to the scripture, and in doing so we see that once again, the lectionary cuts off at a very important point! I told you that the reading ends with Paul's urging to strive after the greater gifts — and what comes next is his confident assurance that if we can do so, he will show us “A more excellent way.” So — does this mean we are already excellent? What is it to be MORE excellent?

May God bless this discussion of the scriptures, that it may help move us in a more excellent direction. Next week, we move into 1 Corinthians 13, concerning spiritual gifts and the Church—and that none of it matters without a foundation of love.