

Out of the Pulpit and Into the Community
1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Second Sunday of Epiphany
Woodbury UMC
January 16, 2022

After a few months of planning and discussion, today we begin our spiritual gifts class. With that in mind, you can imagine how delighted I was when I realized that the lectionary text for today includes the famous passage from 1 Corinthians 12 concerning spiritual gifts. It is funny how things work out.

This passage in scripture doesn't stand alone. I mean, we often read it on its own, and you can certainly reflect on it by itself and come up with some worthwhile insights, but within this letter there are three chapters that focus pretty clearly on spiritual gifts. It is almost a shame that these chapter divisions have been made, in a way, because that encourages us to consider these as complete ideas in and of themselves, and that really isn't the case.

The spiritual gifts class starts today and will go through the end of February. What's more, the lectionary stays with 1 Corinthians the entire time! I sure didn't plan it that way, but again these things have a funny way of working out.

During the past week, I saw something online, intended to offer inspiration. It said this: Butterflies cannot see their wings, but the rest of the world can. And I thought what a great way to consider gifts of the Holy Spirit! Spiritual gifts can be like that, so that other people see them in you before you do, sometimes well before you do.

Spiritual gifts are used for the good of others. This is important, because when we think of gifts, that usually means something that has been given to us, for us to use for our own enjoyment or our own benefit. You can enjoy your spiritual gifts, certainly, but they are given to you to be used for the good of God's people, to the glory of God.

Today is also Human Relations Day, and this is also the weekend when we remember the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on the occasion of his birthday. The more I

thought about it, I saw how all of these things tie together, so you are going to hear me spend a little time on all of those. My hope is that in understanding a little more about each of these, it will help you to better understand the others. The one you may know least about is Human Relations Sunday, so I'll start there.

The United Methodist Church notes: Across the United Methodist connection we bridge the gap between church and community by participating in an offering set aside for Human Relations Day. For more than half a century, United Methodists have observed this church wide special Sunday in recognition of the message Jesus demonstrated during his life: all of God's children are important.

In fact, a full third of the offering is allocated for United Methodist programs supporting volunteers to build churches, assist in community health programs, advocate for social justice, build leadership skills, and help after disasters. This tells us that we are at work together with United Methodists from around the world, and that our intent is to help live out our belief that all of God's children are important.

In 1 Corinthians verse 12, Paul reminds us:

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.

This is one of those texts that is very powerful, but that power may be dulled by familiarity. These words remain as subversive today as they were two thousand years ago.

No person is disposable, no person can be disregarded without impacting others. All the parts form one body, and all parts are needed. When we avoid our neighbor who is hiding in plain sight, we limit the gifts and graces that our sisters and brothers in Christ bring to the table. We limit the experiences, the voices and the beloved community that takes place through mutual sharing of gifts. In Human Relations Day, we join with United Methodists around the world, remembering that the size of the table of divine love is unlimited.

The church is made up of congregations, and the work of the congregation is the backbone of our making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. That is the work of the church, right? And so the job of the congregation is to find ways to make that happen. When Paul explained spiritual gifts to the young church in Corinth, he wanted

them to understand a few things. He focuses in on how different gifts are given by the same Holy Spirit, and that all of it is from God, and all of it working together for the glory of God.

As part of a connectional denomination, working together is in our DNA. We are part of a cooperative parish, a district, an annual conference — we work with one another to do things none of us can do effectively on our own. Here is something else to consider. Our spiritual gifts are intended to be for the benefit of others. This means that what we can accomplish cannot, must not be restricted to our building or our congregation, cannot be just about ourselves. In our scripture, Paul emphasizes that in all types of working, it is the same God at work. This is to keep people focusing on the greater good of the community, rather than themselves. God is working in you for something much greater than just yourself.

It is no secret that our congregation needs our talents just as much as the world does. We are working our way through a time of a lot of change to our church, our denomination, our society. Spiritual gifts are a big part of where we go from here, how we take our faith out of the church and into the community, to continue that transformational work.

As I mentioned, this is also the weekend we reflect on the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As scholar Michael Eric Dyson notes, "King saw faith as a tool for change, a constant source of inspiration to remake the world in the just and redemptive image of God." The transformational work — that is our work, shared with King as a fellow Christian, who himself may have been at his most effective when he stepped out of the pulpit and into the streets, into the halls of power.

Let me say that again: King was a fellow Christian, our brother in Christ, and he may have been at his most effective when he stepped out of the pulpit and into the streets, into the halls of power. As Christians exploring how God has equipped us, the relevance of his example is unmistakable. King was mindful of the power and responsibility of the church in healing the divides of society. Church, our society needs healing!

Remember the vision of our New York Annual Conference — to nurture disciples, to make disciples, and passionately advocate for the needs and concerns of all people. The church fulfills its mission by building up and nurturing disciples. That is why we gather in worship. But that is just the starting point! By discerning our spiritual gifts, we accomplish two

important things. We discover how God has equipped each individual to nurture disciples, make disciples, and advocate for the needs of all people. We can also begin to discern where God may be calling the Woodbury United Methodist Church, and we do that by considering what resources we have been given. If we see that many of us have been equipped in a similar way, or that many of us share a common passion, then this shows us where we can live out our Christian calling.

As United Methodists, our foundational belief in the sacred worth of all persons compels us to "work toward societies in which each person's value is recognized, maintained, and strengthened." Dr. King was also well aware of challenges hindering churches themselves. In a sermon at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., just days before his assassination, King observed: "We must face the sad fact that at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning when we stand to sing 'In Christ there is no East or West,' we stand in the most segregated hour of America."

That was March 31, 1968. Less than one month later, in Dallas TX on April 23, The United Methodist Church was formed, when Methodist predecessor denominations were joined together. Given the current societal turmoil over racism in America, I find it interesting that our United Methodist denomination was formed and founded at a boiling point of the struggle for civil rights for Black Americans. We aren't all comfortable with these things, but it is no exaggeration to say that where we stand on justice in society is an essential part of who we are.

According to an early 1968 Harris Poll, King died with a public disapproval rating of nearly 75%. 75% of Americans either didn't like what he was doing, or didn't like how he was doing it.¹

Can we change the world? Sometimes it seems like everyone hates everyone else — in this climate, is it realistic to think that Methodists might achieve something? Who can say? But in God, all things are possible.

The Federal action creating the day we observe in his name was signed into law by Ronald Reagan in 1983 — just 15 years after his murder. With 75% of the nation unhappy

¹ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/04/04/martin-luther-king-jr-50-years-assassination-donald-trump-disapproval-column/482242002/>

with him and his work, this would have seemed impossible. Yet today, people across the political spectrum claim to be carrying on his legacy.

Change can happen, but it requires hard work.

I couldn't find the precise quote, but I understand that in his life, someone suggested to Dr. King that his birthday may one day be a holiday, and in reply he said that if that were ever to be the case, he would want it to be a day of service, rather than taking a day off. You will find many, many service projects and service opportunities taking place on Monday, as people put that idea into action, to celebrate his life by dedicating a day to helping others and advocating for the vulnerable.

As followers of Christ, how do we honor **our** Lord? Yes, we take off of work and school on Christmas. But Christ is risen, Christ is Lord, and we do not need to reserve a single day to honor Christ. And what better way to honor Christ than through service to others? What better way to pay homage to the savior than by working to help our siblings?

Well, who are we to have such lofty thoughts? After all, if God meant for us to do that, then God would have given us the means to do so, right?

Paul goes on, so I'll go on, but that is for next week. For today, we are left with our United Methodist denomination asking us to take part in the work of bridging the gap between church and community, we are left with the legacy of a man who was the best Christian he knew how to be when he went out of the church, spoke truth and called out wrongdoing, any way that he could. That is an intimidating model; we'd be happy to have just a little part of that impact.

And the scripture reassures us,

There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. And to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

Amen.