**January 20, 2019**

**1 Corinthians 12:1-11; Isaiah 62:1-5**

The Corinthians’ community was one of the first Christian churches. They were creating the wheel, so to speak. The disciples followed Christ. The disciples shared the news with the Corinthians, then off they went! Just imagine trying to figure out how to be church when there never had been a church before. There were no blogs to read or experts to consult. There was no *Book of Order* or other guideline to help them with church business and being. It couldn’t have been easy. For the Corinthians, though, the most difficult part of church was simply being a loving community. They fought all the time – in the privacy of church and out in public. They took each other to court. They questioned one another’s sexual immorality and idolatry and table manners. At the heart of it, the Corinthians didn’t love one another, and they certainly didn’t care for one another. The richer members felt superior to the poorer members. Those with food ignored the needs of the hungry members. Instead of working together to be a community, they were a collection of individuals, each doing what *they* thought best and looking out for their own interests.

But that was not what God had in mind when God gave us the gift of community and companionship and particularly the gift of church. Jesus called people together so that they could work together and love together and serve together. God never expected everyone to *be* the same, but called everyone together to becomepart of the same. Each individual was called to reorder their lives in the same ways with the same priorities. Men and women, young and old, rich and poor, well and sick, all called to love God and love neighbor. God gave us the gift of unity in the midst of great diversity.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians here: “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are varieties of services, but the same Lord. There are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” The Corinthians may have thought they were *sooo* different from one another, but they were actually part of the same whole. Those who were rich, those who were poor, those with higher social standing and those with no social standing – the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God called them individually and called them together. Then gave them something holy. So in the church no one should say, “I am better than you,” for they were equal in God’s eyes, bringing gifts that God gave them. The gifts were not things they did or made for themselves. The gifts were from the same outside source – the Holy Spirit – who valued each of them enough to share something holy.

I know how nice it is to receive a gift. It makes you feel good about yourself, and probably good about the giver. I open a package with my name on it and think, “how special! this makes my day better! when can I use it (or play with it)?”

The gifts given by the Holy Spirit were not just pretty candles or scarves or other things intended for individuals to use or hide away. The gifts given by the Holy Spirit were meant for the community. So instead of opening the package and hiding it away, they had to open the package and bring it out for everyone to share. This was a challenging expectation for a group of individuals not yet living as community.

“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” – not for any one person or family’s good. To each is given something holy for the benefit of all. To each is given something sacred for the wellbeing of the whole.

It reminds me of a folktale wherein a person is invited to see two different scenes of the afterlife. In the first scene, a group of people has gathered around a steaming pot of soup. Everyone was very hungry and frantic to get a taste. They each had spoons with very long handles – so long that they always reached past their mouths – so no one could eat any soup. They were all starving. The second scene was almost identical: another group of people were gathered around a steaming pot of soup, holding spoons with long handles that reached past their mouths. The difference was that this group was not starving. They learned that they could feed their neighbors with their own spoon, and their neighbors would feed them. They all ate until they were satisfied. “To each was given a gift for the common good.”

Christianity is not a religion of lone rangers or narcissists. God gave us the church so that we can work for the common good. Each week we come through the doors as individuals with different strengths and weaknesses. And each week, as we worship God, sing together, and share prayers of joy and concern, God transforms us into community. As we live and work and love and serve together, we put our individual needs aside for the health of all. Sometimes this actually gets in the way of our individual good. But faithful followers of Christ do so humbly and willingly.

A new Gillette razor commercial illustrates this beautifully. Questioning their traditional tagline “The Best a Man Could Get,” the commercial shows some historically acceptable “boys will be boys” behaviors: boys aggressing other boys, men harassing and demeaning women, posturing and posing and the like. A narrator then says, “We can’t laugh it off, making the same old excuses.” After the last two years’ cultural awareness and shifts around #metoo and women’s rights, Gillette responds that “there’s no going back because we believe in the best in men. To say the right thing, to act the right way. Some already are [doing so] in ways big and small. But some is not enough because the boys watching today will be the men of tomorrow.” It’s not enough to pooh-pooh traditional male aggression and bullying. Gillette is calling on the larger community to use our gifts to serve the common good.

This is not just an advertising gimmick for Gillette. The company is investing money in community organizations like the Boys & Girls Club of America to make their commercial come to life. They are using the gifts they have – both financial and a huge audience – to build our common good.

In recent months, I have seen Sweet Hollow make a concentrated effort to share our gifts and work toward a common good. Primarily, regular worship attendance has increased about 30%. Folks are getting themselves out of their pajamas, out of relaxing breakfasts, and into church. Nevermind that any single individual on any given Sunday might want to stay home or do something satisfying to that one person – when we choose to worship together, we are sharing in the holy gift given to us for the common good. Worship does each person good, but it is especially good for our community to be together. It is the one time during the week when we physically manifest the gift of community. If you aren’t here, not only are you missing it, but you are also preventing us from celebrating that sacred gift.

Secondly, because people are back in worship, because we have had some faithful visitors, we have also had children in weekly worship – a priceless gift from God that we have yearned to receive. And because children are here, some people – especially Carol Keil, Frank Sansone, and Sukey Walter – are regularly making a personal sacrifice to miss worship in order to care for our youngest members. The Holy Spirit specifically gave them a gift of love and nurture which they use for the common good by teaching Sunday School and volunteering in the nursery.

Thirdly, pledges are up this year by more than $10,000. For some reason, God has blessed some of our community with a spirit of generosity, which they are investing in the church. The extra dollars they are willing to give hasn’t gone to dinners out or a family vacation fund, but is being sacrificially shared with Sweet Hollow. Some folks may have even achieved a true tithe (10%) in their increased pledge. Each of these families has been given a gift which they manifest in caring for our common good.

The Corinthians were learning a difficult lesson here. Just saying they were Christian wasn’t enough. Just belonging to a church wasn’t enough. God asked more of them – and more o us – than just an identity marker. God asks more of us than tokenism. God asks us for true love and service – to God and one another. As we reflect on where we’ve been this last year, and where God may be leading us this year, we must all be willing to manifest the sacred gifts we were given, in order to care for the common good. Nevermind our individual wants and needs, our primary task is to care for one another. Let us do so with thankful hearts. Amen.