

Text: Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

When in 1986 my wife and I arrived as the ministers of the church in Old Deerfield, Massachusetts we noted that in the congregation there were a number of gays and lesbians, or family members of gays and lesbians. All of them were quiet about it. Each was at her or his own place of acceptance, or non-acceptance, of this. So we sent them each a letter, saying that there was no need for these islands of isolation and, in some cases, pain. We invited them all to the Parsonage in the hope that ministry, ministry, that can only happen when people are in community, might happen between them. It was a big risk for a lot of these people. They had worn their masks carefully for years, decades, lifetimes, and now they were invited to take those masks off in front of others.

To our shock and delight, 100% of those we invited came. But our shock was nothing compared to their shock when they saw each other there, having no idea of their similar, yet different stories. We gathered in a circle and asked them each if they would, one by one, tell the story of why they were there. The first person to speak was the last person any of them expected to be there. She began by saying that one of her daughters was a lesbians and, breaking down and sobbing, said that she did not know how she had failed that her daughter had turned out so “wrong.” The young woman beside her knelt down in front of her and took her hand and explained to her that she had done nothing wrong, that her daughter was the beautiful woman that God created her to be, and that there was nothing to be ashamed of. The older woman said, “But don’t you feel horrible about your family member who is homosexual?” The younger woman replied, “I do not have a family member who is homosexual. It is I who am lesbian, and I no longer feel horrible. I feel great.”

This ministry continued for years, and I cannot even begin to tell you how profound it was. Families that had been alienated for decades were healed. People who saw themselves as failures began to re-image themselves. And, although it took many years in some cases, the masks came off. It was not easy to take those masks off for many. The fear of ridicule and shame was HUGE. But healing DID happen. Years later, when her daughter's and her daughter's partner adopted a child, the woman who had been so ashamed asked to have the baby baptized in the church during Sunday morning worship. Mom was no longer a masked woman ashamed of her daughter; rather she was a proud mother and grandma standing free and open for all the world to see. It was as if, in an amazing reversal of the African greeting she said, “Sikhona—I am here.” And the congregation responded: “Sawu bona: We see you.” Grace happens, sisters and brothers in Christ. Grace happens.

The 3rd century Greek pagan philosopher Plotinus once said, "If we are in unity with the Spirit, we are in unity with each other, and so we are all one." Sawu bona, I see you. I remember studying Plotinus as a Philosophy major at college and intellectually, intellectually, assenting to this thought, thinking it was seriously cool. I cannot say it changed my behavior any—the people I avoided before I read this were the same people who annoyed me after I read it, but from the neck up I was on board. It is only as I age that I am beginning to understand that assenting to

Truth from the neck up is one thing, assenting from the heart in, assenting to it in the *way I live*, is quite another. This is particularly true with something as simple and yet profound as Plotinus's comment. "If we are in unity with the Spirit, we are in unity with each other, and so we are all one." Or, put negatively, If we are divided in the Spirit, we are divided from each other, and we are not One." If we expand upon his thinking we logically must conclude that this understanding of the Spirit of God as the unifying principle of life is necessarily a critical component of fulfilling our humanity. It posits that those who are aware of God's Spirit in themselves necessarily see that same Spirit in the life of their neighbors, and enemies, because the Spirit is One, Life is One, we are One. I stress this because Plotinus was NOT a Christian, and yet he was naming a spiritual Truth that all Christians claim as central. The New Testament is clear on this. We cannot love God, we cannot love God, unless we also love our neighbor and our enemies; to say we love God and yet hate another is to label us liars (the bible's words, not my own). At a time when religious wars are being fought with both ideological and militaristic weapons, this reminder that we are all one, no matter what our religious stripe or nationality is sobering. It reminds us that we cannot be at peace with God, and we cannot claim to know God, unless we are at peace with others. For the sake of my unity with God I must keep working on my relationship with others. And for the sake of my unity with others I must keep on working on my relationship with God.¹

I know all this must seem as a bit of a tangent from this morning's text, but actually it is central to it. Listen:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

As I think back on that night in the Parsonage in Deerfield when those brave people told their stories, their defining stories, I cannot help but think of the varieties of gifts and services and activities that they gave each other that evening, and continued to give as this small group met over the months and years, and all for the common good, and all with the same Spirit. The mother of the lesbian daughter who spoke first gave the gift of raw vulnerability to the rest of the gathered wounded. She could have declined the invitation that evening; she could have chosen to be quiet; she could have chosen to protect herself by belittling others. Instead she created a safe space for others to bare their wounded souls by having the courage and grace and maturity and dignity of telling her story and trusting in the Oneness that her church provided. And the young woman who responded, she gave the gift of wisdom by naming her joyous embrace of her lesbian identity. Next a man named Phil gave his gift of faith as he spoke of God's love for his homosexual son. Tim spoke of being unable to share his true identity with his conservative Christian parents, being unable to journey down a road that might mean irreconcilable alienation from the people who in ecstatic physical union conceived the life that was him; thus he gave the group the gift of knowledge—of understanding how painful life can be, and how precious Oneness truly is, particularly when we see it is not achieved. And the group gave itself the gift of healing, a corporate gift of the Spirit. Each of these Spirit-filled people, in her own way, was able to give a gift to all the others, gifts that the rest would have been so much poorer not to have

¹ I am indebted to the classic essay *We Are All One* by Howard Thurman as the basis of this last point.

received. Because they were in unity with the Spirit, they were in unity with each other, and so they were all one."

Do you see? So often we think of our gifts of things we can DO. And yes, the things we can do are in fact gifts. When I watch a musician or a teacher or a healer or a cook or a gardener, and when I hear and receive and taste and see their offerings I am the richer. But those activities are just a piece of the story, those services just expressions, symptoms if you will, of the larger gift, the gift of *who they are* and HOW they go about living in the world. Each of us is a gift, that is one of the major points of this passage. Each of us, every single one of us IS a gift, not just HAS a gift, but IS a gift. By the way you behave in the world, by the way you love your child or parent or friend, by the way you interact with the grocer and the cobbler and the minister and the lawyer, you are BEING your gift.

Now do not get me wrong. There are times when we do not see each other as gifts, and even times when we do not act as gifts. Parker Palmer once lived in a commune and he noted that he discovered there the First Immutable Law of the Universe, viz., when you are in close contact with an intimate group of people the person put on earth to annoy you the most will be part of that group. He also learned there the Second Immutable Law of the Universe, namely that if that person who bugs you leaves, s/he will be replaced within two weeks by the other most annoying person in the world. In other words, it is a conscious and intentional decision to see all others as gifts. And not only are there times when we do not see each other as gifts, there are times when we, well, let's just say, there are times when what we give of ourselves is less of a gift than it might be if we were at our best.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, being a member of a church is more than just going to church on Sunday, it is BEING at church on Sunday. Being a disciple is more than the act of ministering in Jesus' name, it is the gift of being a minister in Jesus' name. It is the art of learning to be a gift. If Plotinus's words are correct, and I believe they are, if it is true that, "If we are in unity with the Spirit, we are in unity with each other, and so we are all one", then participation in the Christ life is working toward that unity with the Spirit, and with others. It is the intentional discipline of giving ourselves as a gift, and of receiving others in the same way. It is the intentional discipline of prayer with God, and the intentional determination to remain connected with others even when we believe one or more of them are put on earth for no other purpose than to drive us bonkers. It is the intentional effort to form spiritual friendships, particularly in the church. It is the intentional effort to be in unity from the heart in and not just from the neck up.

These past two weeks I have been gently speaking to you about evangelism, about sharing yourselves with others who dearly would love to know you are here. Because, you see, in the unity you are working toward here, you are a gift. As a congregation you have faced some remarkably difficult times and yet you have not only survived, you are today thriving. You are deepening in the Spirit and in mission. Since this past autumn our Music Director Frank and I have been noting time and time again how exuberant the Spirit is in the church, and how this congregation "feels" so alive, so vibrant, so, well, gifted. The Spirit is raging in our midst these days and it is reflective of who you are. "If we are in unity with the Spirit, we are in unity with each other, and so we are all one." And though I said last week, I say again: Share your gift. Share the gift of who you are. The gift of your generosity for Work Options for Women. The gift

of music. The gift of laughter and joy and children and old ones. Share this church. Jesus charged us to be a light on a hill. Shine! The first spiritual gift is the gift of self. And the "self" that is First Plymouth is a wonder to behold.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Come, Holy Spirit, come, we beseech you. Come bless us, pouring your gifts upon us in joyous abundance. Come inspire us to pour out your gifts through us to bless the creation of which we are a part.

Come, Holy Spirit, come and receive our praise. We praise you for the variety of skills and talents you offer us as the Body of Christ so that we may work for the good of all with grace and health. We praise you that you have not given each of us the same gift, so that we may have the opportunity to share our grace and health with others. We praise you that you have not given any of us *all* the gifts, so that we may learn what it means to need the grace and health of others. We praise you especially for the gift of ourselves, the gift of who we are, to share that in unity in you.

Come, Holy Spirit, come and bind us together into one wise, faithful, miraculous, healing, holy, prophetic Body. Come, we pray, and make us worthy to be called the Body of Christ. Amen.