

Pentecost Sunday

June 8, 2014

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1 Corinthians 12:1-13

13 Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. 2 You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. 3 Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.

4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Next week I will be reading many reports and preparing myself to serve as a commissioner to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. And then, on Friday I will fly to Detroit and spend most of my waking hours in meetings discussing difficult and controversial issues.

During the Revolutionary War the British sometimes referred to the Revolution in this country as that “Presbyterian rebellion”. They were not far off. We Presbyterians are a rebellious lot. We have been involved in political controversy from the very beginning.

And this year’s General Assembly will not be any different. Please, do not ask me if I had a good vacation when I get back. This will not be a vacation!

You may wonder, “What is the point of having a General Assembly?”

Presbyterians believe that the gospel has something to say to the world. And we take this time to consider what actions we should take on various issues based upon our understanding of the Christian faith.

We also believe that we are not alone in making these decisions. We believe that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God in Christ is there with us.

That’s why I am a commissioner and not a representative from Central Florida Presbytery. I go to the General Assembly not to merely represent the viewpoints of the people in our Presbytery.

I go to the General Assembly to seek the will of God with other Christians as we are empowered by the Spirit. Indeed that’s what the Session of this church and all church officers are charged to do as well.

Sometimes the will of God aligns with the will of the people. But, the Bible teaches us that often it does not. We are often a stubborn and “stiff-necked” people. We are reluctant to hear God’s Word because it challenges what is near and dear to us.

So, seeking the will of God is not an easy task. In fact when we begin to take the Bible seriously it often leads into conflict with each other and the world. The biblical worldview is often at odds with the worldview of the surrounding culture.

CORINTH

This was certainly true when Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians. The Corinthians lived in a culture that was characterized by immorality, religions that thought they had “the truth,” and rich people who wanted to maintain their position of power and privilege.

Does that sound vaguely familiar?

And these cultural problems made their way into the church. The Corinthian Church struggled with church members, who were immoral in their behavior, church members who thought their spiritual gifts were superior, and rich church members who didn’t want to share with others.

In other words many in the Corinthian Church had just baptized what they already believed and called it Christianity. And their immoral and unjust behavior was tearing the church apart.

What could Paul do to bring the church back together?

He appealed to the power of the Spirit. In verses 13 of our lesson for today we read, “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

Paul was saying that the Spirit that unites us is stronger than the forces that seek to divide us. Now that is hard to believe.

The Corinthian Church was in danger of falling apart. And things have not changed much since that time. The church has experienced tremendous upheaval through the years and continues to experience great division on a number of issues.

You will no doubt hear about some of those issues when it comes to our General Assembly that I am attending.

How can we say that we have been made to drink the same Spirit? Don't our divisions and controversies tell a different story?

THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD

There are certain misconceptions when it comes to the work of the Spirit.

First, the power of the Spirit does not reside in our ability to bring everyone together in a “Kumbya” moment and teach the world to sing in “perfect harmony”. The Spirit is present even (and some would say especially present) when there is conflict.

Second, the presence of the Spirit is not necessarily revealed by a certain emotion. We may not “feel the “spirit” and yet the Spirit is with us.

So how can we perceive the wind of the Spirit? What are the marks of the Spirit?

The Spirit is present when the will of God in Christ is done. Paul says that whenever a person says, “Jesus is Lord” the Spirit is at work. And whenever a person says, “Jesus be cursed,” the Spirit is not present.

This is not just about praising the name of Jesus and avoiding blasphemy. This is measuring our lives and the work we do together in the church by the yardstick of Jesus. How should the life, death and resurrection of Jesus shape what we do and what we say?

There should be no fuzziness when it comes to the Spirit. The work of the Spirit is the work of God in Christ. When Christ is proclaimed in word and deed the Spirit is present. When Christ is denied in word and deed the work of the Spirit is quenched.

GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

Paul told those contentious Corinthians that they were sadly off base when it came to their teaching on the Spirit. They were bragging about their spiritual gifts.

They were using their spiritual gifts as a means of judging others. They thought some gifts of the spirit were more important, and they thought that others in the church just didn't have a clue.

They were wrong.

The gifts of the Spirit were not given to boast our ego (despite what many TV preachers would want us to believe.) The gifts of the Spirit are given to bring us together so that we can do God's work in the world.

Paul said that the work of the Spirit came in many forms. The unity of the church was not expressed in a dull uniformity, far from it. The same Spirit gave a variety of gifts to the church, and each of those gifts was important for building up the church for her work in the world.

THE BODY

At this point Paul introduces the illustration of the body. The body has many parts. All are important, but none are self-sufficient. And if one part of the body suffers the rest of the body suffers with it.

For example, if your nose is stuffed up due to an allergy, all you can think about is your nose. The church works in the same way. We pay more attention to those parts of the body of Christ that are in trouble.

It's interesting to note that in Paul's culture the image of the body was used to strengthen the status quo. Politicians and philosophers said that society was like a body. A body has to have a head that told everything else what to do. And of course the elite rich get to be the head (and possibly the stomach) and the poor need to keep working as the hands and the feet.

Paul turned this image on its head. The Spirit chooses to work through all members of the body. None are more important. They are all needed. And the measuring stick of the church will *not* be honor and status. The measuring stick of the church will be service and love.

The work of the Spirit rightly understood brings us together because it is a work of grace. The power of the Spirit resides in a Word of grace. And grace is the big equalizer.

Paul said Jews and Greeks slave and free were all in the same boat when it came to salvation. They could only be saved by the power of God's grace. In that sense they all drank of the same Spirit, the same cup of salvation, and that common grace was what held them together.

In fact the Greek word for "grace" and the Greek word for spiritual "gifts" are related. Our life together is an expression of God's grace. We are saved by grace and we are knit together by grace. Just as God in Christ has forgiven us so we forgive one another. We serve one another. We love one another.

GAG GIFTS?

Now be warned this is a very messy process. Life in the Spirit is not all sweetness and light. It is a struggle to understand and do God's will. It is a struggle to stay in relationship with Christians who are sometimes quite different from us.

I had a friend who was struggling in her relationship with her children. From time to time she would say, "I know that my children are a gift from God, but sometimes I think that they are gag gift!" God has given us each other, but sometimes when we struggle to stay in relationship, these gifts of the Spirit seem like gag gifts.

I'm sure the Apostle Paul must have felt that way when he made several (what he called) "painful visits" to try and get the Corinthian Church back on track. Finally Paul decided that it would be best to try and help the Corinthian Church from afar, vowing not to make any more visits. Apparently their relationship

had become so toxic that they had to “love” one another from a distance. (See 2 Corinthians 1:23-2:10)

Paul loved the Corinthians enough to leave them alone. He kept contact through his letters, and encouraged them. He felt that they were members of the body of Christ. He thought that they were “saints,” people who had been called by God for God’s purpose. He thought that they had been given gifts by the Spirit to do God’s work.

But, for now Paul was keeping his distance.

That was not the only time it had happened this way with Paul.

Paul and Barnabas, the first missionary team in the church, had a sharp disagreement over whether to take John Mark on a missionary trip. In fact the disagreement was so sharp that these two old friends went their separate ways. The account of this in the book of Acts is very brief, but even in that brief account we can see that this was not an easy process.

Now in the end I think Paul and Barnabas were able to see how God used their division to create a greater witness for the gospel. (2 Timothy 4:11)

And through the eyes of faith I think that is how we need to look at our own disagreements and divisions. God can and does even use our difficult times as a means of grace.

At our last Presbytery meeting two more churches decided to join another denomination because of disagreements they were having with our own denomination.

The negotiations with these churches had been long and sometimes been quite contentious.

It was a sad time for us all, but we affirmed the work that these churches had done, and we wished them well in their new affiliation. And in part we did that by referring to the split between Paul and Barnabas.

They parted company but they continued to work for the spreading of the gospel. What was so painful long ago became a beacon of hope in our difficult deliberations that day.

In my opinion that was a spiritual moment. The Spirit was present in our work that day.

Not all our relationships in the church will be pleasant ones. When we struggle to do God's will, we sometimes get it wrong.

And sometimes the resulting disagreement will require us to love some people from afar for the good of the kingdom

GIFTS AND CONFLICT

But, that does not mean that we cut all ties or say that those who have left us are not God's children. When we struggle to apply the gospel to difficult issues, God can and will use that struggle for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

The split between Paul and Barnabas created a wider witness for the gospel. The divisions within the Christian church have caused us to look at the Bible and the Christian faith in different ways. What were once contentious splits have in some ways become gifts to the church.

For example, I am interested in what the Pope says on certain matters, not because I am a Roman Catholic, but because his interpretation of the Christian tradition can sometimes be helpful in my understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ. I read books on the faith written by Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, and many other streams of our common faith.

At one time these groups did not speak to each other. As I am fond of saying, there was a time when theology was a full contact sport. Say the wrong thing and you could lose your head!

Many of us now see those different streams of Christian thought as gifts of the Spirit. Having Christians looking at different facets of the jewel that we call the gospel enhances our understanding of the gospel. The unique perspectives of these various Christian traditions help understand the gospel better.

LOOK UP

But, despite these historical examples of how the Spirit works in turbulent times, we often become fearful. We worry about what might go wrong instead of trying to be open to what God might ask us to do.

Perhaps we would be better followers of Christ in these turbulent times if we remembered the rhetorical question Paul once asked in his letter to the Romans. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31)

The answer to that question is obvious. We believe that God is for us, and therefore, no one can be against us.

Despite the struggles we have as we seek to be the church I do believe that God is for us. I believe that God’s Spirit is at work in our lives in good times and in bad.

And that this must always be our primary focus.

William Barclay told a story from the early days of sailing, long before the time of diesel engines or hydraulics. The newer, usually younger deck hands were given the task of climbing up the mast when a line was tangled or a sail had ripped and a repair had to be made.

Lines and sails seldom tangle or break in good weather. And masts in those days could be quite high. Climbing one of those narrow pieces of lumber was treacherous enough on a sunny day, let alone amid the howling wind and rain.

It was not a job anyone would particularly want. That’s why they gave that job to the least senior member of the crew.

Often a young deckhand would get halfway up the mast, become frightened and begin looking down. And it was at that moment of looking down that the veteran deckhands would shout, “Look up! Look up!”

These veterans of the stormy sea knew that as long as the novice looked up, he would not become disoriented. But, if the novice looked down, he would lose his bearings and eventually fall to his death.

Barclay’s story is an example of why the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is important in the church. With fear and confusion all around we are often tempted to look down, to become overwhelmed by what we might lose or how far we might fall.

But, Paul encourages us to look up instead of about.

Despite dangerous and discouraging divisions one thing remains true. The Spirit has baptized us. The Spirit of God in Christ is with us and for us.

And that Spirit is not a spirit of timidity but a Spirit of power, a Spirit of love and a Spirit of self-discipline. (2 Timothy 1:7)

God is in charge and not us.

And God's Spirit brings us together. God's Spirit enables us to say with confidence, "Jesus is Lord." God's Spirit gives us hope even when all around us it looks like evil and injustice are winning the day. God's Spirit breaks down the dividing walls of hostility.

God help *us* to look up instead of about.

Amen.