

## All Gifts Welcome



I Corinthians 12:4-11

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In Paul's day the Corinthian community in Greece was amazingly varied, since the Roman Empire drew upon people from its widest reaches. Travel was easy and safe because of its roads, and so people migrated all over the empire. The community in Corinth would have included not only Greeks, but also Ethiopians, Gauls, Egyptians, Syrians, Britons, pagans and Jews, merchants and slaves, gay and straight, women and men. Paul is encouraging people to respect the gifts of each and to appreciate what unique people have to offer.

The wonder of the church community, including our own, is that we learn to respect the character and talents of others, because we meet them face to face and learn to love them and appreciate them for who they are. That's what churches do, to recognize gifts because we take the time to get to know each other.

Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians that each gift of those in the community of faith – especially those on the margins - has value. We are equal as children of God. The UCC says that we have only one leader – and that is Jesus Christ. Yet we are unique in the gifts we have to offer. The various talents and callings of diverse members contributes to the health of the common good. By working together, we make one

body, one whole – and strive together to benefit the health and well-being of our community of faith. We affirm in the United Church of Christ that we are all equally ministers – we each have a calling. Mine is to ‘word and sacrament,’ and yours – to music, art, finance, teaching, organizing, feeding, or finger puppetry, offering God for another vital ministry, all for the common good.

In his book, *Community: the Structure of Belonging*, Peter Block writes: *“If we care about transformation, then we will stay focused on gifts...our work becomes to simply bring the gifts of those on the margin into the center.”*

The brilliant Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas says the only thing that really converts people is “the face of the other.” When the face of the other (especially the suffering face) is received and empathized with, it leads to transformation of our whole being and of the world around us. It creates a moral demand on our heart that is far more compelling than the Ten Commandments. Just giving people commandments on tablets of stone doesn’t change the heart. It may steel the will, but it doesn’t soften the heart like an I-Thou encounter can. Looking into the face and eyes of another shifts our hearts.

Bell Hooks, African American writer and intellectual, said this: *“It’s about humanization. And I can’t think of another way to imagine how we’re going to get out of the crisis of racial hatred if it’s not through the will to humanize.”* That’s what we’re called to do when we cross racial or class boundaries – being converted to respect the equality, gifts, and integrity of the other. When we see each other face-to-face, it changes everything.

In our nation, and even our churches, we struggle with a deeply ingrained and often invisible disconnect when it comes to valuing others. For those of us who happen to be white, it’s often under our radar – we just don’t see it. For example, it’s a proven fact in study after study that if a white person and a black or brown person with identical skills applies for a job, in almost all cases the white person will get it – still. As much as we imagine this is in the past, it’s ingrained and persistent.

Isabel Wilkerson wrote the book, *Caste*. She said that she doesn’t use the word ‘racism’ anymore to talk about inequality; she calls it the ‘caste system.’ Her conjecture is that our nation defines its castes by color – similar to the caste system in India that discriminates by ancestry and birth. Martin Luther King Jr. travelled to India at one point and he realized how similar the two were. This gets enforced by violence and by law enforcement, and has been for generations. It’s part of our nation’s DNA; our Original Sin. People are ‘put in their place.’ Sadly, it’s deeply embedded. MLK preached that our faith tells us that each life, each person, each talent deserves respect and safety -

equally. That's what we hear St. Paul teaching us this morning – that each person offers unique gifts, precious talents, regardless of race or orientation. The early church was known (scandalously) for its diversity – and its respect for equality.

James Baldwin, writing in the 1950's spoke about how invisible racism can be to those who live with privilege, for those whose skin color reflects the right caste, prestige and safety. Baldwin writes: *"Well, if one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policeman, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected – those precisely, who need the law's protection most! – and listen to their testimony. Ask any Mexican, any Puerto Rican, any black man, any poor person – ask the wretched how they fare in the halls of justice, and then you will know, not whether or not the country is just, but whether it has any love for justice, or any concept of it. It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have."*

The Hebrew prophets knew this – Amos, Jeremiah, Micah all said that a nation is to be judged on the basis of how it treats the poorest of the poor: the widow, the orphan, the immigrant. That is how we figure out if justice is at work in a society – how are the most vulnerable treated? Are they preyed upon, marginalized, abused? How are we doing in our nation? How will victims of the fires in California or flooding in Asheville, NC recover and find affordable housing? How will we treat homeless people or immigrants – documented or undocumented?

Black and brown lives for too long have been discounted, treated as 'less-than,' and suffer a much higher rate of death from gun-violence, disease, and injustice. People of color have been treated as "other" and segregated or distanced; and then treated with violence and inequality. The statistics reinforce this. But in our faith we affirm that each gift matters – each person – each child of God - and each is to be valued for the common good. Too often these gifts are rejected, undervalued or ignored.

The pastor and theologian Brian McLaren writes:

*The Beatitudes say, We, in this new movement, bless the very people who are usually excluded. Jesus says, In this movement, we bless the poor and the poor in spirit. We bless those who mourn, we bless the meek or gentle, we bless those who hunger and thirst for justice. We bless the merciful and the pure in heart. We bless the peacemakers and those who are persecuted for standing up for justice. And then Jesus continues: We see the world differently because we bless people who are usually forgotten, despised, or excluded. In other words, we see that people at the margins who have gifts to offer.*

Laws to protect equally all citizens of our country, were born from jail cells in Birmingham and Selma, from courageous non-violent marches in Montgomery and

Mississippi, from the snapping jaws of police dogs and the vicious screams of racists. Rev. Martin Luther King's faith taught that hatred and violence do not have the final say; and that the way of God will triumph eventually. He wrote: *When I despair, I remember that all through history the ways of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants, and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it--always. The Hitlers and Mussolinis have their day, and for a period they may wield great power, spreading themselves like a green bay tree, but soon they are cut down like the grass and wither as the green herb.*"

As Christians, as people who are called to live as Jesus taught, we value each person's contribution, each person's expertise. We are called to offer an alternative – a vision that says *'In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female, but we are all one in Christ Jesus.'* (Gal 3:15) And let's add: "neither, white, brown or black; gay or straight, rich or poor". We value the gifts that each person brings to benefit the wider community.

Jim Wallis writes: *"What will it take to develop a positive, hopeful, and forward-looking approach? We need to talk about what it means to 'repent' from our original sin – and repentance means more than just saying you're sorry. It means turning in a new and better direction, which I believe we can do. We must look backward in order to look forward. We must each one make a spiritual claim: Our racial diversity and social pluralism are a great strength and a gift for our future, because our primary identity is as the children of God- all of us are created in God's image."*

St. Paul realized this back 2000 years ago when he affirmed that our diverse gifts, our unique backgrounds, talents, capabilities and perspectives offer us enormous possibilities for spiritual wholeness and enrichment. He saw how it caused communities of faith to grow and blossom. If we channel all of our gifts toward the common good, then we can do anything – we can build the realm of God here on earth – the 'beloved community' of equality and justice for all.

*"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.... (1 Corinthians 12:4-5) AMEN!*