

Discovering Ourselves in the Digression

I Corinthians 15:1-10

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All summer we have been studying this letter of Paul's to the church in Corinth. We've learned a lot about the Corinthians and about ourselves. As we near the end of the letter, and our study, we see that Paul does not let up on his confrontation of the things that were dividing the gifted community. Many of the Corinthians, rich in spiritual gifts, were straying theologically, and that was causing schisms in the church. In chapter fifteen, Paul addresses this theological point to get the Corinthians back to the heart of the gospel: the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ ~ the hope of salvation, a particular event witnessed by many. You may remember, this is where Paul grounded his letter at the beginning of chapter two, addressing the comparisons of his preaching to Apollos and Peter, and when he came up short, in terms of style, rhetoric and wisdom, said to the Corinthians, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

In this fifteenth chapter, Paul gives us a glimpse at one of the earliest creedal confessions, saying, "I handed on to you as of first importance, what in turn I had received." Then Paul goes on to say, "Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures. Was buried. And was raised on the third day. He appeared to Peter and the twelve. Then to five hundred brothers and sisters. Then to his own brother James, and all the apostles, last of all, as one untimely born, he appeared also to me." And here is where Paul digresses, recounting his failures, persecution of the church, and his own unworthiness, but then says, "by the grace of God I am what I am, and God's grace toward me has not been in vain." On another day, we'll get back to the theological discussion of the resurrection, but for today, let's discover more about our faith, and ourselves, as we learn from Paul's digression.

Paul's digression in talking about himself and the difference Christ made in his life is powerful! In fact much of the power of the gospel is story after story of what a difference Christ made in people's lives, from the disciples to the multitudes. From healed individuals whose names we don't know to Mary, Martha and Lazarus whom we rattle off like relatives. But we hesitate to talk about ourselves and about what God has done or is doing in our lives for many reasons. We're private people. We want to be humble. We're afraid of what people might think of us. We're embarrassed. We don't want to lose our scientific perspective and so on. But if we don't acknowledge what the God has and is doing, if we don't receive the Spirit and embrace our gifts, if we don't tell others, share with them, we miss the fullness of living the faith; the abundant life Christ promised in the Spirit that he would send after his resurrection to fill the church, with life, energy, hope and joy!

So let me tell you a story. Paul's words "By the grace of God, I am what I am" have been incredibly instrumental in my life, most dramatically influencing my call to ordained ministry which has shaped my entire adult life. As a twenty-three year old, beginning my exploration of pursuing ordained ministry, having already served in the church for ten years as Sunday school teacher, interim Christian Ed director, youth director and intern, having been shaped by a non-denominational church that did not believe in the ordination of woman, I hesitantly, filled with

anxiety, had my first interview with what was then the Candidates' Committee of the Presbyterian Church. The chairperson, an older man, asked the first question, with an attitude of judgment, "What makes you, as a woman, think you are called into ministry?" Stunned, I couldn't think. The tapes of why I shouldn't be there played in my head, but what I heard myself say, words, grace given words, words, I don't even remember thinking, "it seems that God has given me gifts and it would be wrong not to use them." The answer defused his resistance, but it hasn't been a smooth journey. The faithful sharing of the perceived gifts has come with a cost. There are still some who don't accept women serving in ordained ministry, including members of my own family of origin, even after twenty-seven years rejecting my call to ministry based on words credited to Paul speaking against women in the church. But, "but by the grace of God, I am what I am..." and, like Paul, that's all any of us can say. We all have gifts, and we all are called to use them. It's wrong, a denial of God's grace not to use them. We all know that they are truly gifts for which we are to be grateful in receiving, and faithful in sharing: sharing them for the building up of the church and for serving others.

This summer, as we've studied this letter, we've been looking gifts, looking at Paul's warnings not to compare our gifts to others. We've looked at the power of gifts to divide or unite a community of faith. We've looked at the interdependent necessity of spiritual gifts in the life of the church. This morning, I want us to look specifically at ourselves, to identify and to affirm the gifts we have in grace been given.

On page five of the bulletin you will see what I have called "a partial list of spiritual gifts A-Z." These are thirty-two spiritual gifts that are named, identified or alluded to in Scripture. I invite you to read through them now. If you are a non-reader or if you left your reading glasses at home, ask someone close to you to help you read the list. No one is too young or too old when it comes to spiritual gifts, as we saw last week in four year old Jack and his gift of helping and as I've seen again and again with homebound people in their 80's and 90's who share in the life of the church by offering the gift of intercessory prayer!

As you read the list pay attention to one, two, three, four or more that particularly jump at you: one, two, three, four or more that resonate with you, that you believe you've been given. I know it be better if we had time to elaborate on each one, but we don't, so just take them at face value, what you think they are. Then in a minute, we're going to have our "congregational participation" part of the sermon. I know it might be a little embarrassing but remember it's in celebration of God's grace in you, God's grace in all of us! I'm going to read through the list and ask for a show of hands for each gift. When I read a gift and you believe you have it, please raise your hand, nice and high. As each gift is named, I encourage us all to look around [those in the balcony have the advantage here] and together let's celebrate the many gifts here this morning. And as always, you have permission not to participate, but I hope you do!

Let's begin: Administration, Apostle, Battle, Craftsmanship, Discernment, Evangelism, Exhortation, Exorcism, Faith, Giving, Healings, Helping, Hospitality, Humor, Intercessory Prayer, Interpretation, Knowledge, Leadership, Martyrdom, Mercy, Miracles, Missionary, Pastor, Poverty, Prayer Language, Prophecy, Service, Singleness, Spirit-Music, Suffering, Teaching, and Wisdom.

Did you see that! This is what I've been so excited about all summer...this is what I am so grateful for...this is why I felt so led to do this sermon series in the first place, to remind you, to remind us all, that Covenant is an incredibly gifted community!! And Paul's words, "God's grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it is not I, but the grace of God that is with me" are true for us. God's grace toward us, here at Covenant, has not been in vain. On the contrary we work hard, but it's not us, we know it's not us, it's the grace of God that is within us!" The grace of God that pours out the Spirit among us. The grace of God that fills us with love, joy, peace and purpose. The grace of God that gives us the abundance of gifts to build a strong, loving church praising God and serving others here and around the world! And we will continue to discover what that means, what it looks like, in the days and decades ahead, as we rely on that grace, receiving the Spirit, embracing our gifts, grateful for our strengths, and humbly remembering our growing edges, as we live knowing by the grace of God, we are, who we are! Thanks be to God! Amen!