

## **“Subversive Diversity”**

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Scripture: Isaiah 62:1-5; I Corinthians 12:1-11

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I can't help but wonder what Paul is responding to when he launches into this discussion of spiritual gifts. One thing that is common to all his letters is their pragmatic nature. Paul isn't writing a thesis or developing a systematic theology. He's responding to real, practical concerns that have arisen within the lives of the various churches he's helped establish.

So apparently there has been some controversy over spiritual gifts in the church community at Corinth. Scholars go back and forth over the particulars of that controversy. Unfortunately, we only have one side of this conversation. We're eavesdroppers on a private discussion between a pastor and parishioners. But at the very least it appears that there had developed a sort of ranking of gifts among the members of the community.

Some gifts were considered more significant and more highly valued than others. And that led, inevitably I suppose, to ranking the people possessing those gifts. What may have been happening, then, was the church community began mimicking the wider society and creating an order of privilege based on gifts. Paul is deeply opposed to that development.

One of the insights Paul discovered when he was converted was the realization that God's action in Christ established a new order in the world. It was no longer possible simply to divide people along ethnic or social or even gender lines. If God's desire was to be reconciled to the world in Christ, then that reconciliation had to extend to all those who would follow Christ. There could no longer be divisions of any kind among followers of Christ. As Paul says in this letter, and in others, “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.”

It's that one Spirit who is the source of every gift. So none of them can be considered better than any other. It's a diversity of gifts among a diversity of people. And it's the presence of that diversity, where no one is ranked above anyone else, that undermines the society in which they all live. The church, in Paul's view, is called to practice and model a subversive diversity.

That practice led to a lot of hardship for the church in its early years. The dominant society is very suspicious of groups that refuse to conform. And Roman society was designed to be strictly stratified. Social classes were fixed and there were very few ways to move among them. And beyond that, interactions between members of different classes was very closely regulated. Wealthy and poor people did not move in the same circles. Slaves and free people did not gather in the same settings. And for the most part Jews and Gentiles shared a mutual disdain for one another.

Those divisions had the effect of making it very difficult for social movements to develop. Perhaps better than any empire in history, Rome was able to control its populations by maintaining divisions among them. So you can see how a movement like Christianity would be seen not just as a mild nuisance, but as a positive threat to the social order.

I'm sure Paul understood that. He was jailed and beaten often enough to understand that the people in authority considered him a threat. But there are times when the movement of God is too

compelling to ignore. There was no denying the unleashing of gifts among the Christian communities. And there was no denying the power of a community committed to overcoming differences and breaking down walls of separation.

Tomorrow our country recognizes the prophetic ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King, jr. King faced what today we understand as the evil of segregation. But in the late 1950's and in '60's that condition wasn't really considered evil, or even unjust by much of the country. It's hard to believe it now, but 50 years ago the civil rights movement was seen as a threat to the social order.

And so long as the "powers that be" were able to contain the movement to the South and confine its participants to African Americans only, it was easy to dismiss it as a handful of leaders leading a small group of people astray. King understood that. That's why he appealed to leaders in the white Christian community and in the Jewish community all over the country. He needed to build a diverse coalition that could undermine the foundations of racism.

It baffles me to think that so many churches were opposed to that movement and supported segregation by either openly defending it or tacitly accepting it. Yet even now it's a reality that 11 o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week in our country. Even now we are uncomfortable with diversity. So while civil rights may not be the burning issue it once was, we are still far from the vision that King was inspired to preach.

That vision has its roots in Paul's vision of a community where all are received in the unity of Christ and every barrier of hatred or fear is broken down. Wherever diversity is embraced that community comes to life. And it can come to life here. North Church can become a community of subversive diversity. When we embrace the gifts of the Spirit at work among us and celebrate what each of us brings to the life of this community, we subvert the forces in the world that want to make judgments of worth and create systems of rank. When we welcome with open hospitality every person who walks through our doors and seek ways to engage them with compassion and love and full acceptance, we subvert the forces in the world that insist on seeing others as instruments for gain or on morally measuring others for fitness.

We can become the community God desires us to be by letting go of judgment and arrogance and intolerance and allowing ourselves to be swept up in the unity of the Spirit. God still longs to hold us as a crown of beauty and a royal diadem. God still longs to delight in us and make us God's own. It can happen here so long as we're willing to let God's Spirit take hold of us and mold us and make us new in the image of Christ.

Amen