

Reflection: Pentecost 2020

“To each something is given” or “Overwintering with the fifth mouse”

No one is useless. Really, no one is useless. Everyone is valuable. Everyone is gifted. Everyone. This, in very simple words is the core of Paul’s message today.

Why is this important?

Because pressure comes from all sides in the form of saying that some are more valuable, more useful than others. Our language exposes how brutally society casts aside those who are seen as “not pulling their weight”. “Bums” “vegetables” or “overeducated”, these can be discarded, are “redundant”.

In a more sophisticated form we internalize subtle pressure: to be fit, to be handy, to be smart, to be talented, to make the most of our time and to show off our usefulness.

Just take a moment and ponder: What pressures to “be it all” or “do it all” do you find yourself under? In your role in your family perhaps? In your parenting? In your community, or organization?

Perhaps you are simply getting older and suffer occasionally from feelings of “not doing enough” or “not being strong enough” anymore, or of losing a skill you had, or of feeling mediocre...

I love the way Paul writes to the community in Corinth. How he helps their confused egos, calms them down and sets them on a better path.

Like us they were wrapped up in a culture that valued competition, beauty and wealth.

They couldn’t help but think in hierarchies: who or what was most important-even in church.

Last week I shared the famous passage of 1 Cor 13 with you, when Paul said to them “if you insist on hierarchy, then I will show you what is truly important: Faith, Hope and Love, and the greatest of these is Love.” None of the qualifications someone has, no matter how good they look on the outside, can be put in a hierarchical order by themselves. All are important. Everyone has something to give, truly everyone. Value becomes apparent in the way talents or gifts are given- Do they promote faith, hope and especially loving kindness? Then, whatever it is, it is in the “top three”.

Let me tell you a couple of stories about the variety of gifts and their value: The summer after I graduated from highschool, I worked on an off grid ranch in the Uinta mountains in Utah. It was a rough setting there and much was expected of the summer students by the boss, a Vietnam veteran and retired colonel. From the start he made it very clear that he was not going to feed “slackers” and that he was going to send us home if we didn’t perform. We had to do demanding work: haying and cooking of all meals over open fires, we had to muck out stalls and empty the outhouse, feed and water the animals and load heavy pack bags onto the trail animals within a tight time frame; tether them correctly at camp overnight, repair any broken things and, above all, make sure that the paying guests at the ranch had pleasant and safe wilderness trips with us. As a city girl from Germany I was a bit in over my head to say the least. He was going to send me home when his wife took him aside and pointed out to him what I actually did do and was good at. In his grumpiness he had not noticed. In his value hierarchy he had not given a thought to the tasks that I did well, nor to the effect that my presence had on the camp as a whole. I was allowed to stay.

“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”

Most likely each of you who read this have been in some such a situation at least once:

How did you learn what your gifts were (because it takes a while to grow into an appreciation of ourselves, doesn't it?) And now- can you cherish how God has made you?

A children's tale tells the parable of 5 mice who prepare their storehouse for winter.

Four of them work very hard. But one seems to have a problem. As they go into a corn field to collect grains, only four pick the grain and carry it back to the den. The 5th lies among the stalks and counts the clouds. When the others angrily ask him to help them he says "I am doing my part- I am collecting memories." Then they go to an apple orchard and the 4 mice drag apples and huff and puff whereas the fifth mouse sits and does nothing. The four threaten him and say if you don't work you will not eat this winter. But he says "I need to collect colours". The mice make their way to a pantry that is filled with jars of all shapes and sizes. They nibble one open and carry the contents to their little den, one after the other. So much back and forth, but the 5th mouse just sits on the shelf and seems to do nothing again. The 4 companions are angry; and he says: "I am collecting smells". And so the fall season goes on and when the earth becomes hard and the first snow falls they are all in the den together (the four mice had a good heart after all). And so they eat from their stores, but they become more and more grumpy despite the food they have. It is dark and dull and nothing happens. And then the 5th mouse begins to tell them stories: Of summer clouds in the sky, and of the colours and smells of times gone by. And as he tells these stories with such lush images the four forget their misery and laugh together and ask for more the next night. How glad they are now that they did not kick out the fifth mouse!

To everyone God's Spirit distributes gifts "for the common good". No one is left empty. Blessed the community which does not only value the polymath or the obvious talents, but discerns and encourages the talent of "5th mice". Blessed are you when you recognize a gift in another and encourage it. And blessed are you when you do not devalue yourself because your gift seems "small" or "insignificant" in comparison to someone else. Is it practiced with loving kindness? In Paul's view that is really all that matters. We are not to compare ourselves, he suggests as "The Spirit distributes to each as the Spirit chooses"- which means, - some are musical and technical and great painters and are beautiful and well spoken- and others are just one of these things, or something else all together. Paul encourages satisfaction with our giftedness. Envy of others would amount to criticizing Creator for what we have been given (or lack) and what good could that possibly be? Such contentment is mirrored in this Psalm:

I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than dwell in the tents of wickedness. " (84:10) In other words, rather be my small self in a loving community, than be a big wig in a corrupt organization.

The "body of Christ"

Do you miss our church community? I sure miss you all a lot. I know that many continue to "**be the, church**". One prays for one another, another makes regular phone calls to isolated people, someone makes meals, another makes masks, another goes shopping for someone else, another pays the bills and looks after the books, another makes plans for the future, another sends caring emails, another writes liturgy and sermons, another checks the building ...

And yet, as the "body" of Christ we miss the bodily aspect of of community- at least I do. The hugs and smiles, the food, the singing and praying together, the fundraisers and the face to face conversations, the feeling of being in a room together and planning something, all that is now to me more valuable than ever- now that it is lost. Those were the ways that the "body" of Christ could feel like a "body". The spiritual truth as to who we are as church community did not get changed in Covid times, what did

get changed is our awareness of the other parts of the body: the loss of sensation...the body has lost feeling in a lot of its limbs...but it is temporary-and the body is still together!!

So, as you read this in your room remember that you are an indispensable “limb” of the body of Christ in the world .You are equally indispensable whether you are in a wheelchair or training for a marathon, equally indispensable whether you are 7 years old or 92, whether you got A’s or D’s in school.

You are indispensable not because you are such an incredibly talented individual, but because you drink from the wellspring of God who is love. Because of God at work in you, you have determination or hope or loving kindness to offer and that paired with whatever gifts you have—those things make the community flourish and we need you!

Spiritual gifts

Does the thought of exploring your gifts further interests you ? If so you may want to explore them with a “spiritual gift inventory” tool . One of these is attached to this email. Let it not intimidate you, please. And if you are at that mature stage where you have already discerned where you find joy in serving in our church, then by no means feel pushed to take this “test”. I always find personality “tests” fun, but I am aware that not everyone does! But if you take it and feel so moved, let me know what you found out about your calling.

A closing word as to how I see the importance of Paul’s “body of Christ” image for our world.

Would you say that we make the goals of the individual person the norm and last resort of all things ? Communal thinking is counter cultural in the western world. Completely counter cultural.

Yet we are killing ourselves in the lonely race to the top, whatever that is perceived to be. Stress abounds .By now the survival of humanity is at stake and the only way to get a chance is to put our individual ambitions on the back burner and look at what makes for the good of all.

We are at a turning point in civilization.

There are so many threats to humanity now that we will not survive unless we work together and value one another, unless we refrain from finger pointing and instead seek the “common good”-as allies. This does not mean that we stay silent over abuses or tuck away differences .

But it does mean that rather than looking at our goals as individuals and pursuing those at all cost, we would look at the well being goals of a community, a province, a country, of earth community, of all creatures. It means that we would talk with one another across the lines of political parties and cultures. And it means that we would call out all that polarizing thinking (I am right, she is wrong,) and seek to solve our problems from a communal perspective because they are communal problems not issues of individuals.

Here is an example: Covid has lifted the veil that was over nursing homes and the farming out of elder care to private “for profit” companies. Now is the chance to talk about how as Canadian society we want to look after our elders, not just the time to fire some individuals on particularly neglectful governing boards of these homes.

In miniature, Paul’s letter addresses the unhealthy consequences of individualism in a congregation. In his letters to the Corinthians he struggles with their egos and, in the name of Christ, shows them a better way.

While our country is secular Paul models a way of understanding community which can be understood by anyone.

A society is not an assembly of individuals; but we must begin to see each other as parts of one body where each is indispensable for the common good. That single mind change would make such a difference, wouldn't it? Let us work and pray for it then.

