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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

For the Common Good

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. 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.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 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. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

April Lawson is Director of Debates for the organization *Braver Angels*. When you hear her title, you may be surprised to know *Braver Angels* is an organization which seeks to "create communities of conversation across political divides." In an essay for the magazine *Comment*, Lawson points out that even conversations meant to bridge a divide still often focus on the idea that if we could just teach others well, they would become like us. Even attempts to understand one another, to know the feelings and life circumstances that lead to their political opinion, attempts to empathetically understand others, even these are most frequently about swaying people to our side. Lawson argues that debate and conflict can be a means by which bridges are built if such debate is "defined not as a contest in which one side will emerge the victor, but as a collective search for truth." Participation is not for our individual benefit, but for a collective one. So often we demand that our unity is based on agreement and, by extension, on sameness, but the reality is unity, at least in the church, is based on something more. St. Paul argues that it is based on the Spirit giving gifts for the common good, and every gift we are given is for the benefit of those God loves.

Mother Teresa is quoted as saying, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten we belong to each other." She could have been writing to the early church in Corinth. Corinth is a city built on an isthmus, connecting the north and central parts of Greece with its southern third. It was a Roman provincial capital and a prosperous city because it had a port on either side of the city—east and west. Paul had founded the congregation in

Corinth and writes a series of letters from Ephesus to buoy the congregation through conflicts within and conflicts with him and his ministry. One these conflicts, maybe even the heart of the conflicts, is about power and authority and how it is exercised.

In Roman civic society, participating in the common life and politics of the day required people, especially men, to be present for the religious rituals of the city's patron gods. Feasts, parties, and politicking revolved around these rituals. So, as some reckoned it, being a Christian meant denying all of that. It would be idolatry, and followers of the way—disciples of Jesus—should remove themselves from such situations. Others—likely those who had always enjoyed the power and privilege of these rituals—claimed that there was no other god than God, the Father of Jesus Christ, and so these rituals were meaningless religiously. Class struggle played into these conflicts. The church believed all were equal—“there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free,” Paul writes—but the reality in Corinth was that many wanted to hold onto power in their community and many wanted to have or preserve that power in the church.

Members of the community decided that the root of power in the church was spiritual gifts. They claimed special knowledge and spoke in untranslatable tongues. Those with knowledge acted like fools; those with tongues formed cliques that disrupted worship. Those who had the freedom to come and go as they pleased would eat every morsel of the communal agape feasts, leaving nothing for the late-arriving Christian slaves who must first finish their work before often sneaking off to worship.

Receiving both high-minded letters from the congregation elite and a report from Chloe's people, that is, Chloe's slaves, Paul writes to the community. He answers their questions and concerns thoroughly, but he also consistently returns the themes of unity and community. When he finally gets the spiritual gifts, the currency of power within the community, he says—and I love how Eugene Peterson puts this in his paraphrase/translation *The Message*, “God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God [God's self] is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits.” The power of the gifts isn't possessing them, it is in their use by and for the community. They aren't intended to divide, but to lift up one another.

Frederick Buechner's famous definition of vocation certainly fits: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.” But there is also Henri Nouwen's, “In a world so torn apart by rivalry, anger, and hatred, we have the privileged vocation to be living signs of a love that can bridge all divisions and heal all wounds.” We are gifted not for our own sake, but for the sake of others.

A few days ago, a friend and colleague of mine, the Rev. Zach Parris, campus pastor at the University of Colorado Boulder, shared his sermon on the Wedding at Cana. In the story, Parris identified a conflict for Jesus—a conflict between Jesus's ideals and caring for the people he loved. And whenever that conflict arises, Jesus always picks the people. He uses this amazing power—to turn water into wine—to gladden a wedding feast and lift up

a community. He uses his gifts not for his own sake—no one but the servants knew what had happened—but for the sake of his community.

In his book, *The Violence of Love*, Oscar Romero reminds us of the communal nature of the church, saying, “God wants to save us in a people. He does not want to save us in isolation. And so today's church more than ever is accentuating the idea of being a people. The church therefore experiences conflicts, because it does not want a mass; it wants a people. A mass is a heap of persons, the drowsier the better, the more compliant the better. The church rejects Communism's slander that it is the opium of the people. It has no intention of being the people's opium. Those that create drowsy masses are others. The church wants to rouse men and women to the true meaning of being a people. What is a people? A people is a community of persons where all cooperate for the common good.” Beloved, we are gifted not merely for our own advancement. We are gifted not merely for careers or hobbies. We are not gifted for advancement, for power, for privilege. We are gifted by the Holy Spirit, in order that that rising tide might lift all ships. We are gifted that we might sail together, propelled by that divine wind to the haven for which our hearts collectively yearn. We are gifted for the sake of one another.

Amen.