Pentecost

May 31, 2020

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

I am worn down.

I am weary.

Because I am worried.

I am worried about what tonight will bring in cities across the country. I’m worried about the virus. I’m worried about hurricane season starting, because storms will hit areas that are weakened by illness and strife.

I’m worried that things will never seem normal again. And I’m worried that there are things I don’t know about that I should be worrying about.

I am worried about so many things that I’m worried I’m getting good at worrying.

My worry is not a spiritual gift. I know that because is not a gift I can use for the common good. It is the result of my efforts to make sense of the world around me, to take control over my own life, rather than trusting in God.

The trouble with trying to be in control and trying to make sense of the world is that we end up looking to the things that divide us and allow us to judge others. We want to take complex issues and boil them down to a notion that we can fit on a bumper sticker. And we look for people whose opinions match our own, to offer us the validation we need to prove we’re right.

But when I put aside my worry and with our readings for today, I’m reminded of things I need to hear over and over. That the gifts of the Spirit are given to us for the common good, that we are people created to be interdependent and in community. And that God longs for peace and unity among all God’s children.

Both Acts and Paul remind us that we are united in saying “Jesus is Lord,” and that we can only do so because of the gift faith through the Holy Spirit.

Because of our faith, we are to be united in our diversity. This isn’t an undoing of the Tower of Babel story, all people speaking the same language and having the same culture.

Instead, we see people listening to each other and understanding each other *in spite* of their different languages and culture, *because of* their faith.

Being united in our diversity doesn’t mean we agree on everything. It doesn’t mean we share a common worldview or culture. It means we value both individuality *and* the needs of the community.

Paul frequently wrote about how we should see our individuality as a gift from God. That our varied spiritual gifts are a reminder that each of us is a beloved creation of God, who created us to live in an interdependent community built on a foundation of God’s love and mercy and peace.

Individuality is a gift from God that makes each of us who we are. It’s the unique set of gifts and preferences each of us has.

But self-centeredness places our own gifts and our own needs above that of others. It encourages us to divide ourselves into ‘those who think like me and are like me’ and ‘those who don’t think like me, who aren’t like me.’

Where is the common good in such thinking? Where is God in our self-centeredness?

Paul wrote to the people of Corinth because they were doing the exact same thing we do today – judging others based on the values *we* assign to them, the value *we* assign to the gifts they have been given by God. And that allows us to feel better than some people, resentful and jealous of others.

We tell ourselves that we can only know if we’re good at something if we compare ourselves to others. After all, who wants to hire a mediocre plumber or a lousy carpenter? Without being able to know who’s better, we risk flooded basements and furniture that falls apart.

But in our rush to compare people, we end up creating divisions and hierarchies where we don’t need them. We inevitably develop assumptions that some of the gifts that God has given us are worth more than others, just as the people of Corinth and the people of Ephesus and the people of Rome did. And we end up assuming that people whose opinions and experiences echo our own are more competent and trustworthy – and therefore “good” – than people whose opinions are different.

And sometimes – not always, but sometimes – it leads to fear and hate ruling the hearts and minds of people.

What they forgot, what we sometimes forget, is that interdependency and unity and diversity are not things to be scared of, but things that build stronger communities, where people can flourish.

If all people had the same vocal range, we wouldn’t know the beauty of a 4-part harmony. If all people had the same gifts, we’d never be able to appreciate the beauty and genius of a Leonardo or a Michelangelo, because there wouldn’t be people to make the paints or quarry the marble, there wouldn’t be architects and carpenters to build museums, there wouldn’t be people who knew how to preserve their work, and people who supported them during the months and years it took to create their masterpieces.

Paul would have us remember that spiritual gifts build up. They serve the common good. They promote the things that, over and over, we see God being concerned about in the Scriptures. Justice for the oppressed. Mercy. Hospitality for the stranger. Kindness. Compassion. Generosity. Patience.

Like my worry, not all the things we’re good at build up or serve the common good. Hatred and bullying and intimidation and divisiveness only serve the good of a few.

When we allow things of the world to divide us, it’s harder to love our neighbor as ourselves. And when fear and hate rule the hearts and minds of some people, it’s infinitely more difficult.

But the command to love our neighbor as ourselves doesn’t mean we let our neighbor do as they please. It doesn’t mean we sit by silently when one neighbor harms another, when one neighbor denies another justice.

There’s pretty much nothing about being a faithful follower of Jesus that allows us to stay in our comfort zones all the time. Jesus was known to flip over a table on occasion.

The only way to have the unity and peace God desires is for *all* of the beloved children of God to be able to freely use the gifts that the Spirit has given them for the common good.

Sometimes, that requires us to be courageous and speak up, when we’d rather be silent. Sometimes, it requires us to be willing to listen to others, even when they’re saying things we don’t want to hear. Always, it requires us to be willing “to act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humblywith our God.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. Micah 6:8 NIV [↑](#footnote-ref-1)