Sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany

January 16, 2022

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

 For the past few months, I’ve subscribed to a study of the first 5 books of the Bible. The author is a rabbi, so the way she approaches Scripture, the way she understands the Bible, is different than how I read the same texts.

 I started the study because I’ve never had the opportunity to study the Torah from a Jewish perspective. What I’ve learned is that rabbis ask a *lot* of questions, not so much to get answers, but to always be seeking a deeper way to understand God and apply the lessons of Scripture to our lives.

 In one of the weekly emails, she delved into the concept of being created in the image of God and what that means for how we treat each other, especially people different from us. She said, “It’s one thing to understand intellectually that we’re all created in the divine image. It’s another thing entirely to figure out how to live that fact out in the world.”

 These are words St. Paul could easily have written himself, and they offer us a focal point for the readings we’ll hear from now through the end of February. In these readings, we hear two distinct lines of readings that weave together our understanding of who God is and how we are called to live as those who bear God’s image.

 The first strand is the revelation of who Jesus is, which comes from John and from Luke. These texts tell us about Jesus’ character and what God values.

 The other strand is passages from Paul’s 1st letter to the people of Corinth. Here, Paul addresses conflict that had arisen in the community. The people were creating hierarchies of spiritual gifts, having decided that some were more important than others. Which inevitably led to some *people* being elevated over others. Paul feared they were overcomplicating their faith and at risk of straying from what Jesus taught.

 When we consider these two strands in light of the creation story’s assertion that we are formed in God’s image, we come to a fuller understanding of what it means for us to bear God’s image in the world.

 From John’s Gospel, we get a story of abundance. Not just of wine, but of joy and delight.

Prodded by his mother, Jesus turns a potentially embarrassing situation into one of wonder that allows a celebration of a wedding to continue unimpeded. Which tells us there is an abundance to what God does, whether it’s speaking creation into being or bringing joy and delight and wonder to humanity.

 Paul wanted the people of Corinth to stop comparing their gifts in ways that encouraged hierarchical thinking, and to start using their gifts for the common good, as they were intended. He understood that hierarchies build up some at the expense of others. But if we’re all created in God’s image, he argues, none of us is more or less important than the other.

 2000 years later, we don’t seem to have made any greater strides in this area than the people Paul wrote to.

 If we accept the concept that God created us in God’s image, then we believe that each of us, in our own way, has the potential to reflect some characteristics of God. Paul would argue that these characteristics are made manifest in the gifts we’re given by the Spirit.

 But Paul also argues that we’re meant to be seeking unity as the Body of Christ.

 The great struggle for the church on earth then is how we balance our differences with our quest for unity.

 It’s easy for us to assume that unity requires uniformity. That we all need to share a common understanding of who God is and what we’re supposed to do because of that understanding.

 It seems to me that if God intended for us to be uniform in how we understand God…well, God could have worked things so we’d have less potential for diverging opinions. Thousands of years of rabbis and Christian theologians wouldn’t have found things to wrestle over, nuances to ponder and argue over, in the Scriptures.

Surely the God who created all that ever existed, the God who turned water into wine without lifting a finger, could easily nudge our minds so that we all come to the same conclusions.

 Yet, in God’s infinite wisdom, God has not chosen to do that.

 That suggests to me that God wants us to learn how to navigate the seemingly paradoxical notion that we are all created in God’s image, but we are all different. That the God who created us as beings who thrive in a community wants us to learn how to successfully *live* among each other, even when we understand God differently.

 To put it in the perspective of the readings we have these 6 weeks: John and Luke offer us a better understanding of the characteristics of God, while Paul helps us learn how to live our lives of faith having been created as distinct beings, each endowed with a different set of those characteristics of God that the evangelists tell us about. All of them encourage us to live out our faith in ways that reflect the love of God.

 It is easy to be dismissive of our own gifts, elevating those gifts others have been given.

 The list of gifts I was not given is long. I know full well that I would be a terrible CPA, an inept mechanic, a dreadful surgeon. In our home, I’m not the one who does the taxes, and I’m not allowed to use sharp objects for a reason. But I was given the gift of being able to talk in front of people, in certain circumstances, without a paralyzing fear of embarrassment.

It may be tempting to feel that my gifts are less important than that of being able to operate on someone and save their life. But that’s the kind of thinking that Paul was warning us about.

 Each of us is given gifts, meant to be used not for our own glory but for the common good. When we move away from our temptation to create a hierarchy of the worthiness of those gifts, we create an environment in which all the gifts God has given us are nurtured and appreciated.

 And those gifts lead to abundant life for all of creation, as God intends.

 There can be unity in our diversity. Because our unity lies in proclaiming the good news of Christ crucified and risen, trusting in the promises of God’s mercy and forgiveness, through the unique set of gifts God bestows on each of us.

 May we build such a place among us, that we reflect God’s love in all we do.