

Reflection offered by Rev. Richard Topping, January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2025

Passage: 1 Corinthians 12: 1-13

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

## Variety in Church

One of the reasons that we have four gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - is quite simple. As the books we call the New Testament got put together, those who did it realized that the only way they could get a single condensed-and-ironed-out version of Jesus' life was through violence (William Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, 87-88).

Gathering the individual books that make up our New Testament by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church said, "we've got to keep these four gospels." In the Christian church we can't move from many voices to one voice by violence. People who follow Jesus Christ find it out of keeping with what we know of our non-violent, turn-the-other cheek Saviour, to go from multiple voices to one voice (in the books of the bible or in church meetings) through fear or manipulation or intimidation.

In the church's judgement, it was just not Christian to squelch other legitimate witnesses – even if it makes the Bible a little rough around the edges. Multiple voices triumph over tidiness where it comes to Holy Scripture. We'd rather engage in wider listening than get easy closure. Better to have a variety of Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - better to listen to four perspectives, than to shut down other perfectly acceptable Christian perspectives by brute force.

We didn't end up with a monochrome, cookie-cutter, singular and thoroughly edited narrative of the life of Jesus. What we do have are four accounts of the life of our One Lord – and together they provide a great richness and depth to faith that we wouldn't have if we didn't have them all.

We've got Matthew with his wise men and great commission – and his fondness for weeping and gnashing of teeth! Mark with his quick-paced action thriller approach. The Harrison Ford Gospel. There's Luke the story-teller – only he lays out the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son that we love. He's the Stuart McLean of the New Testament. And then John who puts it all very simply but profoundly in his Word made flesh story. We understand all his words, but his sentences take work. He uses confusion to teach us.

Four Gospels give variety and depth. Four Gospels make it hard for any of us to finally say, "I've got it now." Just when you think you've figured out Jesus by Luke's solo story, into the other ear comes John's tenor Harry Connick Jr. voice, and we realize Jesus is no one's possession, there's more to it, and he's elusive.

And so here at church, we're not waiting for the editors down at Reader's Digest to clean it up the story of Jesus for us. Not at all. We'd have to commit violence to do that, and we'd lose the crux of the story. We do not want to get a smooth narrative if the cost is coercion and the richness of Christian expression.

You see Christians, while they worship the same Lord Jesus Christ, are at their best good with a variety of voices, multiple reliable witnesses. Unity of faith in Jesus, whose life, death and resurrection is recorded in all four gospels, hasn't required uniformity. What we've got in the Christian church is unity of faith through a diversity of witnesses – one Lord, one faith, one baptism - four gospels.

St. Paul writes these words about the life of the Christian Church:

there are varieties of gifts

there are different kinds of service

there are different kinds of working

but the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God works in all of them.

The Spirit, the personal and abiding presence of God, comes upon the followers of Jesus and life and diversity are born, like at the dawn of creation. The church is a creature of the Word. The church is not just a natural human institution; it is not just an organization; it is a living breathing organism. The descent of the Spirit upon Jesus' disciples means the animation of Christian church.

And the life that God breathes into the church is chock full of variety. It turns out that we've got a God who loves diversity and the multiplicity of expression. For not only does the Holy Spirit inspire four great gospels so that the church isn't left with a monochromatic, single-perspective account of the life of our Lord; the Holy Spirit - that lover of variety, gives multiple gifts to the Christian Church. We, who people the pews, don't all see things the same way, and that's not a curse but the result of God's action in the world.

Try and remember that in Church meetings! The fact that sometimes you just can't get other Christians to see the matter your way is not impertinence on their part; it is very often the result of the work of the Spirit. Take that in and we begin to see things differently. We are not all the same. Don't be surprised if someone says over and over, we need to be more welcoming. That's not a complaint. That's not about your failure. That's about their gifts. Hear it as a request to be involved.

There are, says St. Paul, "varieties of gifts, service and workings." With our baptism comes the gift of the Spirit, and through the Spirit, various God-given abilities for the good of the whole church. In addition to nurture and nature, there is grace, and in baptism God distributes a multiplicity of special talents for the good of the church. It is clearly God who is behind variety in church.

I just love the way St. Paul makes his point about the importance of the diversity of gifts and ways of service in church.

What happens if individual congregations resist diversity? What happens if, say a church puts all its eggs in one basket, where it comes to gifts and service? What happens if we start punching out Christians like Ritz crackers – all salty and the same? What happens if we say - that a gift, only some work in church, is the only one that really matters?

In an inelegant analogy, St. Paul imagines a human body and asks, “what if the whole body were an eye?” And again, “The head can’t say to the feet, I have no need of you?” The body is a cooperative effort. Each part requires the others for a fully functioning body.

If the head gets all uppity with the feet, next thing you know you’ve got passive-aggressive shoes on your hands. Feet, head and hands work together to get the work done. Without a cooperative effort – damage is done. St. Paul makes the point that a body in which members are at war or in competition with each other is, at the very least, uncoordinated and, at the very worst, terminally ill.

Like a healthy body, a healthy church is full of coordinated variety – it allows for the expression of various sorts of gifts and service and work – because in doing so it reflects God’s ordering of the church. Where we resist diversity of service and activity, the truth is: we resist the God who made it so. God orders the church – not us! St Paul says it: “God has arranged the members of the body, as God chooses.”

Imagine if we took that seriously in our strategic planning. What gifts has the Spirit given us, and what does that mean for the mission of this group of God’s people. That is organic listening for the Spirit’s leading discernment, not top-down imposition of order.

In the Church at Corinth, church life was strained and competitive. Some got shouted down, excluded, suppressed. Instead of the rich full palate of Holy Spirit inspired colours of service, they worked only with monotonous shades of grey that left most people out and bored and dispossessed in their own congregation.

It seems to me that if St. Paul is right about church life, and I for one think he might be, then one of our tasks here and now is to help on the recognition side. Christians have gifts given by God to serve each other in the church and in the world. We, to whom the Spirit is given, can be generous in our praise of those who use their gifts or who might use their gift if they were encouraged to do so, for the common good.

I don’t mean flattery (we don’t want to ignite their pride); nor do I mean worrying so much about flattery that we say nothing encouraging at all (we don’t want to get hemmed in by our own envy). I mean saying out loud to other people who serve so well, “my, you are gifted for this form of service. I am grateful to God for your gifts. Thank you for your wonderful encouragement.” In this way, we help one another discern the gifts that God has given to each one and encourage others to use what God has given them in and for the church.

I think this is particularly important for the children and youth of our churches. We help fan the flame of the Spirit in their lives by drawing out what is in them through encouragement and recognition. We might take our cue from good parents who do this with their children. No good parent punches out children in assembly-line, cookie-cutter fashion, trying to make them all the same: that can only be done by doing violence to the person God has given this child to be.

Individual attention, drawing out what God bestows by loving direction and encouragement is the work, and it is also the good work of church in the lives of its members. There is a variety, God-given, Spirit-induced, bestowed-from-on-high variety in church life – let's recognize it, not stifle it; let's fan what's the Spirit's given us into full flame.

Now, you might ask, "Why bother?" It is so much harder to manage this Spirit induced diversity of gifts and forms of service. Monotony is not always inspiring, but at least it can be managed and controlled. When the Spirit comes in the book of Acts – there is a mighty wind, forked lightning, civil disobedience people speak in all kinds of ancient and modern languages – and we think bilingualism was a challenge!

The Holy Spirit, the diversity-inducing Spirit of God, doesn't cower to institutional stability and sameness and enforced conformity. You just never know where the Spirit might strike.

In his wonderful essay, "Toward the Spirit of Christ," James Dunn asks what happens where for control's sake the Spirit is resisted: He writes these ominous words:

"A church that seeks to restrict and control the spirit, as too dangerous and unpredictable, may be safe, but it has signed its own death warrant. A church that seeks to follow where the Spirit leads will have to expect the unexpected and be prepared to be shaken to its core. But that's life – the life of the Spirit." (Dunn in *The Word of the Spirit*, Welker ed., p. 26).

And that's precisely what frightens us – shaken to our core? I am a Presbyterian; I find it hard to adjust when someone moves my slippers. Do we really want the Spirit in full diversity-inducing measure?

We made a calendar for a church I served in Montreal. In the month of January, we portrayed an engraving from the front of the communion table on it. The Spirit in the form of a dove was shown. However, we initially had the Holy Spirit, not descending like a dove, but going up like an eagle, leaving us. It was a mistake; but I understand why it might be done.

The Spirit comes on the followers of Jesus, and, in the book of Acts, the surrounding crowd thinks that is it "happy hour." "Looks like intoxication to us," they said. These people are under the influence! That kind of God intoxication and the freedom and spontaneity it engenders can scare

people whose ancestors' invented insurance. Articles in Church magazines that show people singing with raised hands with eyes closed generates no little anxiety for the rest of us.

St. Paul doesn't entirely disagree with some of our concerns about disorder. He says, "God is not the author of confusion." When the Spirit comes, yes there is diversity, just like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, whom the Spirit also inspired. However, in the midst of the diversity there is a confession, just like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It isn't about us. God gives a full palate of colours so that we can paint a beautiful picture. Diversity is for the sake of confession. In case of the gospels, it is four takes on the one person of Jesus. St Paul says, "no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Spirit."

If we help or speak or serve or show someone the way, it is all to direct attention away from us to the one who lived and died and rose again for the world. What the church says when our diversity is Spirit-born and Spirit-directed is "God loves the world." "For God so loved the world."

There is a name larger than our own individuality and self-direction and reputation that is worth loosing ourselves to. The name is Jesus Christ. "No one," writes St. Paul, "can say Jesus is Lord except by the Spirit." Put the other way around, "everyone, who is given the Spirit, does say Jesus Christ is Lord." If it's not Jesus Christ we're confessing, even in our most excellent efforts, then it's not Holy Spirit induced and God pleasing work.

We live in a world where there are many pretenders to who is large-and-in-charge, even this past week! Where Jesus is confessed there is room for all, and he invites mercy to all! That means it isn't the pentagon, the white house or wall street to which we give our allegiance. The Holy Spirit invites confession of the one whose life shows not the love of power but the power of love for all.

To live and breathe and strive together toward that confession in the power of the Spirit in all we do at church is the goal – whatever committee, whatever service. The common goal of the Christian church is to confess Jesus Christ – and his love for the world.

Without that thread running through all we do and say here – the church reverts to a series of competing interests' groups, and why on earth would anyone bother to come to church to get that. That sort of gut-wrenching form of human life gets served up everywhere. The Spirit liberates us for life, to live out our baptism in the service of the good news of Jesus Christ.

A friend of mine gave me a book last year: *Indictment: The Criminal Justice System on Trial*. It is by a Canadian Lawyer and best-selling author Benjamin Perrin.

**He is a law professor** at the University of British Columbia and served in Prime Minister's Office as in-house legal counsel and lead policy advisor on criminal justice and public safety. He was also a law clerk at the Supreme Court of Canada. His biography on the Allard Law School website concludes like this: "Ben enjoys running, swimming and obstacle course racing. He is a follower of Jesus Christ."

Why bring him up this morning? Well, Ben, I think has the gift of mercy. And I think the Holy Spirit has changed him from a tough on crime stance to one of kindness.

He writes, "In Jesus' life and teachings, I see a major emphasis on mercy, forgiveness, compassion, and humility. I hear Jesus saying, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. . . . I see myself as no better and no worse before God than someone who is a convicted criminal, even someone guilty of heinous crimes. The Bible says we all fall short, and we are all deeply loved by God and can receive his free gift of mercy through faith in Jesus Christ."

And he offers this invitation: "I'd challenge any professing Christian to let God search their hearts and test their minds to see if their actions align with those professed beliefs – or if their hearts are hard and unmerciful. No one is beyond redemption. For me, these currents move strongly down the river of mercy, compassion and peacemaking for broken people. And Ben gives his life to it in public!

Thanks be to God for the Church:

diverse in Spirit ignited gifts.

united in its witness to Jesus for the love of the world. **Amen.**

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