



Christ United Methodist Church

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Sermon: The Holy Spirit's Quiet work

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Speaker: Pastor Don Archer

When you only have a little more than a dozen preaching opportunities before you retire ... you may find yourself wandering into neighborhoods and dark alleys that you were warned to avoid. That may be what I am doing this morning by preaching from 1st Corinthians rather than the one of the gospels. Taking a walk on the wild side. Let's see what happens.

The New Testament book of 1st Corinthians was written by the Apostle Paul to the very successful, but often troubled church at Corinth. In fact things were so complicated at the Corinth United Methodist Church that at least one other follow-up letter had to be written.

In this 12th chapter of 1st Corinthians the Apostle Paul seems to be addressing something called **spiritual gifts**: what they are, where they come from and how they are to be used. The various gifts are listed: *wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues, interpretation*. This is not a comprehensive list. Other spiritual gifts are discussed in other places in the New Testament. In this text, Paul is apparently discussing the spiritual gifts being used in the church at Corinth.

Depending on our background/experience in the life of the church you may or may not be familiar with this whole concept of spiritual gifts. Some of you may have taken a survey or participated in a study that helped you identify your particular spiritual gifts. For others, this whole conversation may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Relax. Whether you know all about spiritual gifts or nothing at all, I want to assure you that I want to focus our attention on the greater issue at the Corinth Church and, perhaps, within the church in our present time.

The Corinthians were very spiritual people. Someone described them as *having swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers and all*. Many of them seem obsessed by the dramatic work of the Holy Spirit. (tongues, prophecy, healing, etc.). Sadly, at the same time, they ignored the quieter work of the Spirit to draw them into a community that respects all its members. One way of thinking about their situation is to say that they were divided into two groups: extroverts and introverts. It became so bad that they could not share the Lord's Supper in the way that Jesus intended. They brought their **differences** to the table. And that is where I see some connection or similarity with the church in our present time. I speak of the church universal, not this congregation or, exclusively, our denomination.

As the Apostle Paul talks about spiritual gifts, I think that the most important thing he has to say is found in verse 7: *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the **common good**.*

What does that mean? It means that the person sitting beside us in the pew or kneeling alongside us at the communion rail: that brother or sister in Christ matters **more** than all the spiritual gifts in any congregation. If/when we fail to recognize this then our spiritual gifts work against us, not for the sake of the gospel. Paul went so far as to say that if we get to the point that we place certain gifts above others or the people that have those gifts above others, it might amount to cursing Jesus instead of acknowledging him as Lord. Ouch!

In Paul's mind, the work of the Holy Spirit always points to the Spirit's interest in the common life of those it draws together. The work of the Spirit is all about recognizing Jesus as Lord. Second to that is building up the group/congregation rather than glorifying the individual. *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the **common good**.*

As individuals we may receive gifts from the Spirit, yet each gift is for the body **as a whole**. In very simple, but direct terms, if a gift cannot be shared, and shared for the good of others, it is not from the Spirit. I say that because I have noticed a disturbing trend at work. A trend that tries to assert that the Holy Spirit can only work within one group, one theology, one type of person. There is no denying that there are liberal and conservative interpretations/understanding of scriptures. We sometimes use the words progressive and orthodox. You may know which group you identify with. Personally, I can never figure out where I fit in. It has been my experience that the Holy Spirit of God can, and does, work within people regardless of how they understand the gift of holy scripture. The Holy Spirit is not on my side. The Holy Spirit is not on your side. The Holy Spirit is @ work to remind us that there is no side. There is only Christ Jesus and the work of the kingdom of God!

I once saw an ad on the church page of a newspaper, the section where churches list the times of their services and their address. One church described itself as being *A Holy Spirit Church*. I certainly hope so. We cannot be the church, without the work of the Holy Spirit and the various gifts that it manifests. It takes the Holy Spirit to overcome all of our differences and empower us to work for the common good of sharing the grace of God in Jesus.

In some traditions of the Methodist church, there was a custom of using a common cup for the service of Holy Communion. One cup, one chalice, was used by everyone. Everyone. I met a man who had been a part of that tradition. His father was a pastor and he insisted on the common cup. He told me that he hated it because, without fail, he always received the cup from someone who had a cold, the flu, or some other illness. He raised this object to his father with the suggestion that anyone with a cold should receive the cup last. His father thought about the suggestion and then said to his son: *What if we let everyone who has a cold receive the cup first?* Sensing that his father was clearly insane, he replied: *then everyone would get a cold!* He said that his dad did not respond, only smiled. It was only later that he realized what his father was trying to tell him.

The work of the Holy Spirit is not to divide and separate it is not to avoid or protect, it is to share, to bear one another's burdens, to work for the common good, by sharing the love of God with everyone.

We all have the same cold. We are all sinners in need of the grace of God. Sometimes it takes the power of the Holy Spirit to help us see that.

Amen.