

I am not sure the name of the missionary or even what country he was in but I think this is a story worth sharing. The priest had spent months and months slowly talking with the chief and other leaders in one remote village in the area. The leaders agreed they liked what he had to say about being born a new in Christ and the promise of eternal life. So it was agreed he would teach the rest of the village. When the missionary believed he had reached his goal in converting hearts and minds to the Gospel, he went to the chief and said it is time for baptism. But, he also said, there are some in the village who have not taken God's word seriously so they will not be baptized.

The chief was astounded at such an attitude. His reply was not what the missionary expected. The chief said, "We know that this one is lazy and this one is slow to understand, but that does not mean they are not a vital part of our community. If we are not all baptized then none of us will be baptized." Equally flabbergasted and aghast that his months of work would be for naught, the missionary reiterated his concerns. The chief affirmed, "We are a village that works together and shares together. As a village the more capable help the less capable and the strong help the weak. The storyteller shares with the ones who always forget our history. The teacher aids those who struggle with life lessons and the best cook shares with those who find boiling water difficult. We all have different gifts and abilities. To say that one is not worthy will split the village and will destroy our whole way of being. All or none will be baptized." The priest went away to pray for guidance. And then he remembered the stories of the early church how they shared with one another and how the arguments over who was more gifted or more talented caused division and strife. And so he returned to the village and all were baptized to the joy of everyone.

If the church in Corinth had the same mindset as the new church formed by that unknown missionary, Paul would not have had to take the time to write the letter he did to them. But the people of Corinth, living in a world stratified politically, socially and economically, where your quality of life was greatly influenced by who you knew and what you knew about others, were determined to rank the importance of the abilities of members of their faith community.

Paul begins by reiterating that we are one, we are all connected together and in Christ, through baptism and the power of the Holy Spirit. So there are no distinctions to be made based on family history or standing in the greater community. In effect Paul is saying get over your selves. Discontinue your

ego trips. We are all on this journey together and the only way to complete this journey successfully is with the help of each other.

To reinforce this message Paul uses the image of the body, an image scholars tell us was used often to explain connection and distinctions, unity and diversity, during the time. Paul's emphasis is on unity of the body even though we all have distinct gifts. And with those who have had disabilities and health issues we know that it can be a challenge to be in the world when your body is not fully functioning. Think about the time you sprained an ankle or your wrist how difficult even the simplest of tasks became. Several years ago I severally sprained my left ankle. The impairment eventually impacted my knee and my hip on the left side. Which in turn caused my back to go out as I was compensating for the ankle injury. It was a great reminder that when one part goes the whole body suffers.

It is so when we are community. Imagine the chaos created when the garbage collectors go on strike? Or think of the challenge in our modern world when the power goes out and everything, including traffic lights, becomes nonfunctioning? What would happen if our shops were to close, if we had no farmers or our water and sewer lines were to burst and we had no one to fix them? And yet we tend to rank people based on perceived value.

Every gift, every task is valuable to the whole. One example of this that has stayed with me is an automobile assembly line. What if the person responsible to tighten the screws on the passenger side of the rear axle didn't do their job? Granted it is a very repetitive and probably not the most interesting work to do. But if that person does not take their job seriously the car will not be safe to drive. Each person on the assembly line is responsible for specific task that is needed to build cars. Each is thus a car builder.

We all have our gifts. We all have our unique abilities. In this selection of scripture Paul talks about those who are preachers and healers, leaders and miracle workers, prophets and teachers. It is quite a daunting list. But for the Corinthians they are thinking those who do these things are better than others in the faith community. And that is just not so.

And the list of gifts needed to keep us operating as a well-oiled community of faith far exceeds any of the references to gifts found in Paul's letters.¹ We

¹ see Romans 12 and Ephesians 4

need those with the gift of hospitality and welcoming and visitation. We need those with the gifts of baking and cooking and creativity. We need those who are good with numbers, those who are able to see the big picture and those who focus on the details. We are in need of those who are organized and those who are able to work through chaos. We need those able to assist in the office, in worship and beyond. When we talked about gifts in the Wednesday morning class, they suggested we, as a community, have the gifts of acceptance, understanding, fun, compassion and sharing. The diversity needed to make us whole, to make us as complete as possible, is tremendous.

And the beauty is that for every new person who joins us, they add their own unique gifts. And each of us, as we grow in our faith, may strengthen a gift we currently have or we just might grow into new gifts. That is the beauty of being in a loving and supporting faith community, we are often encouraged to try something we did not think we are qualified to do because others see a gift in us that we have denied or never considered. I know many a person, including myself, who ended up teaching Sunday school or a Bible Study, because others supported them in that endeavor.

And then there are those times in our lives when we find we can no longer do what we once did. Our ability to bake, to stand, to sew, to read, to speak clearly, to sing, weakens. Many have shared over the years that they feel they have no value as they cannot do what they once did. And it grieves me so, that we put so little value on the gifts of mentoring, of prayer, of being a good listener, of knowing when to let others take over, and especially of the gift of receiving. For if a gift is to be truly a gift it must not only be freely given it must also be received. So many of us have trouble receiving. At my niece's high school graduation she shared how she hated public events where she was put in the spotlight. Not that she didn't enjoy what she was doing but because she did not know how to accept, how to receive, compliments. How hard it is for us to say thank you without being embarrassed.

And with the changes that are before us as a congregation, we think no one will be able to do what those who have gone before them have done. It is amazing how that attitude actually stops people from trying because they fear they will fail or not be good enough. And so the gifts of gracious acceptance and support are required so that we welcome and embrace each person for who they are and what they have to offer. This applies to new members, new

members of leadership, new ushers, musicians, as well as new pastors. For each person has their own unique combination of gifts and graces.

Accepting each persons' gifts is exemplified by the story that goes behind the picture that we have on screen of a group of young boys sitting in a circle, their feet touching to form a perfect inner circle. Again I apologize that I don't remember the source of this story. But it has to do with some Westerners who had traveled to some part of Africa, I believe to an orphanage, to share the Gospel through good works, including teaching and medical support. They devised an obstacle course game to accomplish two things. The first goal was to offer the children something different and fun to do. The second goal, and most likely the primary goal in their minds, was to assess the abilities of the children and to help them determine who were the leaders and who were not.

To their surprise the children worked together. The faster ones slowed down so that the slower runners would not be left behind. The stronger ones boosted the less strong over barrels and walls. The children made sure each person finished and that they finished as close together in time as possible.

When the course had been conquered the children sat in a circle, feet touching, forming a perfect round. The organizers asked them why some of them didn't just charge ahead. And the children were very clear, that yes some were fast runners, but they might not be strong enough to climb the walls. And there were some who were very good at strategy, able to figure out the best way to conquer an obstacle. And they all needed the support of those who encouraged them to keep going. So why would they leave one behind?

Thinking of the story, the picture is, for me, a beautiful image of what it means to be the body of Christ. United together in our diversity with one another and with Christ. And so we are all members of the body of Christ. May we always look on our differences as gifts that build us and bind us together rather than as a reason for division. Amen.