

Different...but the Same

I Corinthians 12: 4-13

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Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017

All those different people gathered together on the Day of Pentecost. We read just a bit earlier in worship from Acts 2, and the differences stand out. Oh my goodness, the differences stand out. They came from all these different places, coming to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost, the annual feast celebrated 50 days after the Passover. All these different people, Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs. These different people from different places spoke different languages. So much was different about them. And then...the Holy Spirit came. With the sound like the blowing of a violent wind the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in what seemed to be tongues of fire, filling them with the Holy Spirit. And in a moment, in an instant, all those differences melted away and they all became the same. They all were filled with the same Holy Spirit and what was different became the same.

The differences in the Book of Acts were real, very real. They were indeed from different places. They spoke different languages. Early on they were different in that some were Jews and some were converts to Judaism. Later the differences would include some being Jews and some being Samaritans, two noted religious rivals. Later still the differences would include Jews and Gentiles, two completely different religious, ethnic, and cultural groups, as different as night and day. And yet when the Holy Spirit filled them they realized they were the same.

Twice in the early chapters of the Book of Acts the early church is described, and the image that dominates is that they were together. Acts 2:44 tells us, "All the believers were together and had everything in common." Then again in Acts 4, "All the believers were one in heart and mind." (4:32) The sense of all being the same, the sense of togetherness, the sense of community...the unity that came when the Holy Spirit blew upon the people like the rush of a mighty wind was a gift from God. So it is that the early church was exhorted to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:3)

In the first letter Paul wrote to the church of Corinth, he draws attention to what makes all the members of the church the same. They all have the same Father. They all have the same Lord. His greeting to the church in I Corinthians 1:3 emphasizes that they are all the same. "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Later he gives extensive focus to the reality and to the role of the Holy Spirit in making them all the same, of uniting them into one body, what Paul refers to as the Body of Christ. Might we pause for a moment in holy reverence, in reverent awe, as we

reflect on what God is doing? God is bringing different people, different people from different places with different languages and different cultures and different customs and different ethnic backgrounds, people who look different and speak different and act different, and God is making them one. God is making us one. God is revealing the wonderful and marvelous and transforming truth that we are all the same. There is one God, there is one Father, there is one Lord Jesus Christ, and there is one Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit that was poured out on the Day of Pentecost, and the Spirit that continues to be poured out today.

Unfortunately, this moment of holy reverence, this moment of reverent awe, is almost immediately interrupted. At least that is what the Apostle Paul experienced. At least that is what the Apostle Paul experienced with the church in Corinth. No sooner had the church heard the good news that through God the Father of all and Jesus Christ the Lord of all and the Holy Spirit who was in all the believers were all one, were all the same, no sooner did they receive this good news than they began to divide themselves over the ways they were different. It would almost be comical if it wasn't so painful. It would almost be comical if it wasn't so harmful. When you read the letter to the church in Corinth you find out they were divided over numerous differences.

- We are all the same, but I follow Paul...but I follow Apollos...but I follow Cephas (Peter)...and then those who somehow were able to set themselves apart by saying, "But I follow Christ." (I Corinthians 1:12)
- We are all the same, but I was baptized by Paul...and we can imagine others making their own boast about who baptized them. (I Corinthians 1:13-17)
- We are all the same, but I am a scholar...but I am a philosopher...but I am a teacher of the law...but I am particularly wise. (I Corinthians 1:20)

And perhaps the most damaging claim of all. "We are all the same...but I have this particular gift of the Holy Spirit that sets me apart...that makes me different...that sets us apart...that makes us different." I say this is perhaps the most damaging of all for when the gifts of the Spirit are used in this way, are lifted up as being different, then the inevitable result is division. What was intended to be unified, with the emphasis on all being the same, now becomes divided, and the emphasis is on what is different.

Imagine just for a moment how the Apostle Paul must have felt. He came to Corinth with a message that is almost too good to be true. Corinth was a cosmopolitan city, a center of business and trade, a hustling and bustling town, a town steeped in the influences of Greece, with the many gods and idols and beliefs and practices that set people apart. To the diverse and different and undoubtedly divided people of Corinth, Paul was able to share with them that there is one God who created the heavens and the earth. This one God is the God and Father of all. Because this one God and Father of all wanted to draw all of his children together as one family of faith, he sent his one and only Son into this world to save this world. The divisions and differences among people

were a sign of the brokenness of this world, of the ravages of sin, differences that were played out in wars and prejudices and oppression and greed and violence and discrimination. Giving clear and compelling evidence that Jesus Christ was this one Son of God, and that his death on the cross was the means God used to buy back this lost and broken world, Paul proclaimed that there was salvation in the name of Jesus Christ. Twice Paul tells the church in Corinth they have been bought at a price. (6:20 and 7:23)

Having experienced this salvation through the name of Jesus Christ, these new believers were now filled with the Holy Spirit. Twice Paul tells the church in Corinth they are temples of the Holy Spirit. But there is a difference. In I Corinthians 6:19 Paul tells them as individuals, “You are a temple of the Holy Spirit.” We are each individually a temple of the Holy Spirit. But just to be sure the people understand how this makes them the same, in I Corinthians 3:16, when Paul tells them “You are the temple of the Holy Spirit,” the you is plural. “You all...you all together...you all as one...you all as the same...are the temple of the Holy Spirit.”

Imagine just for a moment how the Apostle Paul must have felt. He came to Corinth with a message that is almost too good to be true. There is one God and Father, there is one Lord Jesus Christ, there is one Holy Spirit who not only dwells in you but who unites you. You are the same. And then imagine how the Apostle Paul must have felt when the Corinthians responded by saying, “Yes we are the same, but we are different.” And saying we are different they began to divide. I asked you to imagine how Paul must have felt when those who were united together and made the same in God’s eyes began to divide over their differences. But beyond what Paul must have felt, imagine how God felt. Imagine how God feels, when the church, intended to be unified, intended to be united, intended to be one, intended to be together, intended to be the same, begins to divide over differences.

I was reading the paper a few months ago when I came upon a small paragraph buried in a much longer article. A woman was reflecting on how hard life can be, not just for herself, and she had just lost her husband, but for all people. She said, “Not long ago, a friend picked up her son from a summer day camp and found him beaming with pride that he’d finished the robot he’d spent two days building. The next morning, he returned to find his robot had been destroyed: Bullies had taken only his apart — and then told him that he was worthless. After that day, his mother watched him sink into a spiral of anxiety and depression. Even when he went back to school in the fall, she recalled, “He’d put on his hoodie and sit in the back, in his own world.”

You know that story broke my heart, just like I'm sure it breaks your heart, just like I'm sure it breaks the heart of God. We're all the same. We are all children of God. But then someone says, "We're all the same, but different." Your robot, your project, it is worthless. The church in Corinth had bullies. Your gift of the Spirit...is worthless. My gift is better. We're all the same...but you are different. Could it be that the great and mighty rushing roar of the Holy Spirit who filled the believers on the Day of Pentecost, is destined to be quenched and silenced and stilled and squandered by a foolish people who say, "We are all the same...but different."

Friends, hold tight to what Paul writes to the church in I Corinthians 12. He writes words inspired by God, the God who has taken people who are very different, and through the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the filling of the Holy Spirit, God has made the many who were different the same.

- "There are different kinds of gifts...different...so very different...there are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them." (12:4) Different...but the same.
- "There are different kinds of service...different...so very different...there are different kinds of service, but the same Lord." (12:5) Different...but the same.
- "There are different kinds of working...different...so very different...there are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work." (12:6) Different...but the same.

There is a spirit of division that comes when we say, "We are all the same...but different." The Holy Spirit is at work when, by the grace of God, by the grace of God and the love of Jesus of Jesus Christ, we are able to look at one another and say, "We are all different...but the same." The words are the same, but the arrangement literally makes all the difference. We are all the same, but different...those words divide. We are all different, but the same...those words unite. That's what it means to be the Body of Christ. We are all different, amazingly different. But instead of our differences making us say about someone else, "You are worthless," we see the beauty of what God is doing, bringing all of us different people together into one family, into one community, created by one God, bought back at such a great price through the love of Jesus Christ, and united through the same Spirit who lives inside each one of us.

Today we celebrate not only Pentecost, but also the great feast known as The Lord's Supper. May we who are many, may we who are different, may we find our unity, our purpose, and our place, in the Body of Christ. We are different, but in Jesus Christ we are the same. And that is such a beautiful thing. The Body of Christ is such a beautiful thing.

How Beautiful

Twila Paris

How beautiful the hands that served the wine and the bread and the sons of the earth.

How beautiful the feet that walked the long dusty roads and the hills to the cross.

How beautiful, how beautiful, how beautiful is the body of Christ.

How beautiful the heart that bled that took all my sin and bore it instead.

How beautiful the tender eyes that chose to forgive and never despise.

How beautiful, how beautiful, how beautiful is the body of Christ.

And as He laid down His life we offer this sacrifice, that we will live just as he died:
willing to pay the price, willing to pay the price.

How beautiful the radiant Bride who waits for her Groom with His light in her eyes.

How beautiful when humble hearts give the fruit of pure lives so that others may live.

How beautiful, how beautiful how beautiful is the body of Christ.

How beautiful the feet that bring the sound of good news and the love of the King.

How beautiful the hands that serve the wine and the bread and the sons of the earth.

How beautiful, how beautiful, how beautiful is the body of Christ.