

EPIPHANY 2C/LECTIONARY 2

January 17, 2010

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Isaiah 62:1—5 Psalm 36:5—10 ***I Corinthians 12:1—11*** John 2:1—11

I'm going to do something a little different today. Today I'm beginning a three-part message focusing on the Epistle or second lesson reading for the day. Today and for the next two Sundays the message will focus on the readings from First Corinthians. Since we're going to be spending three Sundays focusing on these texts I think it's important that we first take a look at the setting of these texts.

First Corinthians was written by the Apostle Paul to the community of Christians in Corinth, which is in Greece. Paul first visited Corinth in the year 51 or 52 and stayed for eighteen months while helping to form the Christian community there. Following the writing of First Corinthians in 57 while he was in Ephesus, Paul returned to Corinth in 58, this time staying for another three months.

Being a good pastor, Paul kept up with the communities he had helped form, receiving word via messengers or letter. While we have only two books in our Bible called Corinthians, it is believed that Paul's correspondence with this church consisted of at least five letters.

Corinth was a major metropolitan port city. During the time of the Roman empire, Corinth was the seat of government of southern Greece. It was also known as a very wealthy city. The people who lived in Corinth at the time of Paul were probably not much different than you'd find in many of our modern cities. There was the full range of socio-economic classes. The people came from all over the known world. These diverse people practiced a wide variety of religions, most of which we would now term as “pagan” or polytheistic – meaning “many gods” – religions.

In today's reading we hear Paul responding to some concerns of the Corinthian community which he had received in a letter from them. The majority of Paul's concerns in this first letter to the Corinthians had to do with the difficulties of maintaining the Christian community in the midst of such a cosmopolitan city.

Specifically, the issue that gives rise to the portion of the letter we read today and the next two Sundays is the Corinthian community's beliefs about the practice of speaking in tongues. This practice, also known as *glossolalia*, was highly prized among the pagan religions, considered to be the highest of the spiritual gifts.

And so, almost no sooner had the Christian community in Corinth come together than they had begun to create a hierarchy of spiritual gifts. And borrowing a page from their pagan origins, they placed speaking in tongues as the highest gift. It was this rank-ordering of gifts that had led to conflict among the congregation, and the letter to which Paul responds in today's reading.

Paul begins his response today by reminding the community of their pagan origins, and pointing out to them that they are no longer Gentiles, but Christians called together by the one true Holy Spirit.

He warns them first of all that not all “spiritual powers” are necessarily good. When they were pagans, they also had been caught up in [the] rapture [of speaking in tongues], but this had only resulted in their alienation, [being led astray to mute idols]. He wants them to understand, therefore, that he is not talking about spiritual realities, but gifts from God. The first work of God's Holy Spirit is to bring a human being into relationship with the Lord, enabling him or her to say, “Jesus is Lord.” Any impulse that denies that relationship cannot be from God.¹

He then speaks of the varieties of spiritual gifts – not *just* speaking in tongues – as all coming from that same Holy Spirit. “Since the Spirit they have received comes from the God who called them into community, the diverse manifestations of this Spirit serve functions within that community.”² By reinforcing the fact that all spiritual gifts are inspired by the Holy Spirit Paul is attempting to deconstruct the hierarchy of spiritual gifts the Corinthians had created, and place them all on the same plane, because they come from the same Spirit.

Since it is the Holy Spirit which calls the Christian community into being, and it is the same Spirit which gives varieties of gifts, then Paul's point is that all spiritual gifts are for the building-up of the community of Christ. “The Spirit controls the process whereby these gifts are chosen and distributed. Church members don't need to worry about ordering or arranging this process.”³ “Since it's the Holy Spirit doling them out for community wholesomeness, each is [to be] equally regarded. It's a potluck, if you will, where we don't want all desserts, all baked beans, or all pickles, so the Spirit personally ensures the food groups are covered.”⁴

So, in essence, what Paul is saying is that “our call from God doesn't come apart from our unique gifts.”⁵ All who are called to faith by the Spirit are gifted for ministry. The question we should be asking is *not*, “Do I have any gifts for ministry?” What we should be asking is, “What gifts to I possess for ministry?”

Questions to ask yourself to help discover your own unique gifts for ministry are things like:

- ◆ What do I like to do?
- ◆ What am I good at?
- ◆ What am I passionate about?
- ◆ What is needed in my community?
- ◆ How does my faith live and breathe every day?

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Shortly after John Mark and I arrived at Picatinny I was appointed president of the Protestant congregation at the post chapel. Our congregation had recently experienced a change in chaplain, going from one who was much-loved to another who wasn't loved well at all. It wasn't his fault. It's always hard to follow someone who's well-loved.

But the impact of this was that our Christian community suffered. Many who had previously been very involved in chapel ministries drifted away. Many who remained were very critical of the new chaplain. So I spent a lot of time in conversation with the chaplain to try to determine how the ministries of the chapel needed to change in order to adapt to the changing situation.

During one particular conversation the chaplain said something to me that will stick with me for the rest of my life. Indeed, his words have helped form my own theology of ministry. I asked how he envisioned our ministries changing. He said to me, “I believe that the ministry of the congregation is revealed by the gifts for ministry that each member possesses.” Such a simple statement. “The ministry of the congregation is revealed by the gifts for ministry that each member possesses.”

This theology of ministry is drawn straight from this 12th chapter of First Corinthians. The Holy Spirit grants spiritual gifts to the individual members for the building up of the community of Christ. These gifts, then, when brought to light and offered into service reveal the shape of that particular Christian community's outreach to the world.

Imagine that we were each to thoroughly examine ourselves, openly and honestly, to determine what gifts each of us have been given for ministry. Imagine that we would write each one of these gifts on separate pieces of paper. Imagine that we would each place these slips of paper into an offering plate, bring them forward to the alter, and ask for God's blessings on our gifts. Then imagine that we went through a deliberate process of examining this variety of gifts to see what this might reveal of God's intentions for our congregation. What would the ministry of Abiding Peace look like?

I firmly believe that God has given this congregation all the spiritual gifts we need to carry out the ministry that God intends for this congregation. If we have often felt adrift and directionless, perhaps it is because we have not fully trusted in God giving us all we need to be the Christian community God wants us to be. Or perhaps we have withheld some of our gifts, erroneously believing that they would offer nothing of merit to the ministry of the congregation.

I know this is one of the most gifted groups of people I have ever encountered. I am excited by the possibility of everyone freely offering their spiritual gifts into the service of God and their community. What would the ministry of Abiding Peace look like if we did that? Quite frankly, I don't know. But I'm excited about the possibilities!

Amen.

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¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation, Revised Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 309.

² *Ibid.*

³ Kim L. Beckman, “Second Sunday After the Epiphany” in *New Proclamation, Year C 2009-2010: Advent through Holy Week* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 80.

⁴ John S. McClure, “Second Sunday After the Epiphany” in *New Proclamation, Year C 2003-2004: Advent through Holy Week* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 86.

⁵ Beckman, 80.