

One Spirit, One Body
by the Rev. Ellen Williams Hensle, 5/24/26

On Friday morning I had the privilege of being here as the families of 25 four, five and six year olds celebrated their graduation from PCCH Preschool. And yes, our son Albert was one of the graduates. And no, I didn't cry, but it was close. But whether or not Albert was graduating, I would have been here, because Ches Pres Preschool graduation is such a special event. The kids, who are somehow already so big and still so little – the kids stand right here on the steps in nice neat rows. And after singing a song about how ready they are for kindergarten, they sit down, and then are called up one at a time for a message from their teachers.

Our wonderful teachers offer a little personalized word of encouragement to each of the kids, naming their gifts aloud in front of their parents and their classmates. Parker, you are happiest when you are making up games to play, as long as everyone is included – you are going to love kindergarten. Vinny, you have a natural gift for numbers, and your curiosity helped everyone learn so much this year – you are totally ready to take on kindergarten. James, your smile lights up the room, and we can't imagine our classroom without you – we know you are going to do so well next year. Ciel, you are brave; Nora, you are kind; Lily, you are creative; Dash, you worked so hard... each student in turn gets their moment in the spotlight, their moment when someone not their parents says, here are the gifts we see in you. Thank you for being *you* with us. We bless you as you move on from here; we hope you continue to grow in your gifts as you take your next steps.

As I listened to 25 heartfelt messages from the teachers, one for each student – and yes, the teachers did cry – as I listened to the teachers lift up the gifts of each graduating student, I imagined the Apostle Paul smiling down on us. Because I think he would appreciate this practice of naming each student's gifts in turn, graciously and in no particular order, with attention to the individuality of each student. Lifting up a variety of gifts – it's part of what Paul is trying to do here in his first letter to Christ-followers in the city of Corinth.

The Corinthians are having some trouble. They have been baptized and have received the Holy Spirit, as Paul affirms that everyone who has been baptized does. And the Holy Spirit has given the Corinthians a variety of spiritual gifts, everything from great wisdom to the ability to heal, from the power to speak God's truth to the power to speak in tongues. Not in tongues as in the Pentecost story we read from Acts, when the apostles spoke and were able to be understood in the native languages of the wide diversity of people who were gathered together in Jerusalem that day. No, some Corinthians had the ability to speak in tongues as in to speak in a heavenly language, a heavenly language unintelligible unless someone is there whose gift from the Holy Spirit is to interpret those tongues. The technical term for this spiritual gift of speaking in tongues is glossolalia. (That's a fun vocabulary word for you.)

But instead of seeing glossolalia as one of many spiritual gifts, a gift of equal importance with other spiritual gifts, the Corinthians saw speaking in tongues as the highest spiritual gift. And as a result, people who were able to speak in tongues soon took on elevated social status within the church community. I can see why. To be so full of the Holy Spirit that you can spontaneously speak the language not of human beings but of divine beings – wow. That person must be especially blessed. Extra holy. As humans we are always playing the comparison game, aren't we, always finding ways to stratify ourselves.

But Paul wants the Corinthians to know that this is not the right use of spiritual gifts. The point of spiritual gifts is not to determine social status based on which ones we think are holier or more special. And the point of spiritual gifts is not to use them to get ahead of other people in the community. As my mom used to tell me often and as I now say to my own child sometimes, "it's not a competition." No, the point of spiritual gifts is to use them – the point of spiritual gifts is to use them for the common good. Through the Holy Spirit, God gives gifts to each person in the community, gifts that are to be used for building up the community. In the next chapter Paul will go on to say, "if I speak in the tongues of mortals or of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." The gifts of the Spirit are to be used for love. For love.

And if we all had the same ones, we wouldn't get very far. If all we did was stand around speaking in tongues, we'd never get anything done. If all we did was proclaim God's truth and nothing more, we'd have trouble getting about the business of the church, the business of caring for one another and for our community with the love of Christ. So God gives us all different gifts; Paul lists just some of the options here in 1 Corinthians: wisdom, knowledge, healing, faith, prophecy, discernment. God gives us varieties of gifts, Paul says, varieties of ways to serve, various manifestations of the Spirit *for the common good*. A diversity of ways to contribute, of ways to contribute that are each valuable, each valuable in their own way.

And so we are not to rank each other based on who has what gifts, Paul reminds the Corinthians. Speaking in tongues is not holier than discernment; the gift of prophecy is not more special than the gift of wisdom, and so on. All these gifts come from the same God, the same Spirit at work in each one of us. And we are all members of the same body, Christ's body. One body of Christ, working together in harmony for the common good.

Paul borrowed this metaphor of the unified body from Greco-Roman politics. One classic example: in 494 BCE, the first plebeian secession saw the common people rise up against the ruling class in Rome. So the wealthy and powerful patricians sent an emissary named Menenius Agrippa to the common people to put down the strike. He supposedly did so by telling them a fable concerning a body: before the parts of the body all worked together as they do now, some of the parts were indignant that they provided food to the belly without the belly doing any work for it. In their anger, they agreed that the hands would not bring food to the mouth, the mouth would not receive any food, and the teeth would refuse to chew. And what happened when the hands, mouth and teeth refused to work? The body nearly starved to death. So get in line, do your job, and trust that the elites do in fact deserve their status, Menenius Agrippa told the commoners. *Hierarchy is natural, hierarchy is good for you.* We patricians may look idle, but you couldn't survive without us.

Paul, for his part, flips this political metaphor of the body on its head. Instead of using it to reinforce the existing hierarchy, he talks about the body in a way that breaks down any Corinthian's claim to superiority. Each member of the body is necessary, he says. Each member of the body is valuable. No member of the body is more important than the others. No member of the body can function on its own. The body is one body – each part relies on the other parts. Each of us, regardless of our status, regardless of our gifts – each of us is part of one and the same body. Each one of us contributes something to the whole. And no part of the body can work unless all the parts work together. We are all baptized into the same body, the body of Christ. No matter where we came from, no matter what gifts we've been given – we are all equally part of a unified whole.

Imagine what the world would be like if we really tried to embody the Apostle Paul's vision of the unified body, the unified body working together in concert, as equals – or put another way, imagine what the world would be like if we bottled up the spirit of preschool graduation and took it with us everywhere. What would happen if we lived like we really believed that we are all of equal value, that everyone we encounter has something to contribute to the common good, that the gifts of each person are necessary for making a healthy and functional whole, a meaningful whole? What would happen if we lived like we really believed that the administrator has as much to offer as the powerful public speaker, that the burger flipper has as much to offer as the billionaire, the young child as much as the CEO, the asylum-seeker as much as the generational citizen, the person who relies on government benefits as much as the politician, the quiet listener as much as the one who readily speaks his mind, the griever as much as the one who is filled with joy... What a different world that would be.

And while we long for the day to come when every person can see the value in every other living thing – while we long with all our hearts for the very kingdom of God – we practice what Paul preaches in our own faith community. We contribute to the common good from the gifts God has given to each of us: the gift of hospitality; the gift of truth-telling. The gift of showing up; the gift of creating beautiful things. The gift of doing the dishes; the gift of making music. The gift of asking the hard questions; the gift of challenging the status quo. The gift of generosity; the gift of teaching. The gift of patience; the gift of prayer. Varieties of services, but the same Lord. And each necessary for the functioning of the body.

And as we use the gifts God has given us, we also take time to notice the gifts we see in others. Maybe we should all line up here on the steps and name the gifts we appreciate in each other – I'm sorry I didn't print out a diploma for each of you. But we don't have to wait for a graduation to see the good that others bring to the body – any time is a good time to name those gifts, and to express appreciation. So thank you, each one of you, for all the gifts that you bring, whether you think much of what you offer or not. We wouldn't be us without you.