

SERMON - THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY – 5 AUGUST 2018

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Father Mark Menees, D.D.

Tenth Sunday after the Trinity

I Cor. 12:

Lk. 19: 41-46

I would not have you ignorant about spiritual gifts says Paul. Why, because when bound together in faith those gifts render a church into a force to be reckoned with in the world. The dilemma is that we can become conformed to the world and use God's gifts poorly.

Some 25 years ago National Public Radio began the broadcast of an old style show named, "A Prairie Home Companion". Created by the lean, lanky, deep voiced Garrison Keillor, it is a 2 hour program about the mythical Minnesota town, Lake Wobegon. It is a community full of Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and other assorted unusual characters. It seems nothing really remarkable happens in this sleepy little town until you step back and see the big picture. Then it occurs to you that all these folks, when put together bring about a very interesting fabric of humanity, and even their frailties become signs of grace. The byline for the show is: "Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men good-looking, and all the children are above average!!" In this town is Tollefson's general store where everyone shops (because there is no place else to do so), and on the sign over Tollefson's you can read, "If we don't have it; You don't need it!"

Today's Epistle from is St. Paul to the Church at Corinth. Corinth was second only to Alexandria in the Mediterranean as a seaport and center of commerce. Shipping in and out of the docks was 24 hours a day, 365 days per year. It was a place where a seafaring man could slack his thirst and in a hurry. There were even stone steps that served as billboards, because carved into them was a visual advertisement of what they could get, how much variety, and how to get there. Truthfully, there could have been a sign over the bay saying, "If YOU DON'T need it, we've probably GOT it!!" And for less than you might imagine. Corinth was a legendary for its moral behavior and an embarrassment even to the Athenians, who were lax by any measure.

This is the context into which St. Paul had planted a fledgling Christian community; a city/port that saw no limits on human behavior. The presence of this band of Christians presented no immediate threat to the ethical standard of the citizenry. However, the OPPOSITE was certainly not true. The ethos and the morality, the atmosphere of Corinth permeated every aspect of life and Paul's pastoral concern was well founded that it might be affecting the church. Corinth could be said to be a place of self-made individuals who worshipped their own creator!!!!

Paul had heard that this little community was anything but a **communion**, rather it had become a place filled with strife, conflict, and disconnectedness, and suffering from a loss of vision about their true purpose. Confusion had arisen over the fact that different people had differing strengths/gifts and they are now vying over whose is superior. As Luther one commented, "We have learned to serve ourselves in ALL things, even the things of God." The connecting point between Corinth the city, and Corinth the church is that both had taken on one primary, operational principle; namely, I AM THE CENTER OF MY WORLD, THEREFORE WHAT I WANT WILL NOT BE DENIED. Does this sound anything like the world you see around you every day? Paul's entire letter(Chapters 2-11) to this group about morality is to make one point clear—when you put yourself at the center of the world **it will come undone**, and it will waste what God has provided. It isn't the issues themselves that cause the problem, but displacing GOD from our hearts and minds, and allowing something, some behavior, some object, some self-image or some relationship to stand where **HE alone stands**. "I would not have you be ignorant about spiritual gifts, Brethren" begins this lection. I would not have you Agnostic, literally. Instead **KNOW** that what the Spirit gives is the same as what the Son bestows and this is the same as the Father creates, but all for one purpose; to serve God and his creation, not ourselves.

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The Corinthians claimed for themselves FREEDOM. Because God is gracious they believed they were free to do whatever they wanted. They forgot that freedom bestowed by Grace creates both a relationship and a responsibility. It is this Grace of God which makes us a communion and not a gathering of strangers. How is it possible for a community to exist when individuals believe and behave as if their wills/gifts are superior to the good of the whole?

That is the very dangerous abyss over which every one of us here must step!! It is the question which we need to ask ourselves every time we are ready to exert our own views. Is our freedom serving God who gave us that freedom, or are we serving ourselves. It is sometimes painful to encounter ourselves as we really are, but that knowledge (verses agnosticism) allows us to respond to God faithfully. Never underestimate the power of self-deception, which is why self-examination before confession is vital. We all have the capacity to create a beautifully constructed argument about why we should have our own way. But is that the gift of the Spirit for our community? This is why St. Paul says, “no one speaking by the Spirit can say Jesus is accursed.” What he means is that true spiritual gifts serve Christ, and when they do not, no matter how powerful or elegant or significant they may be, they are not truly of God. It is rather the fruit, the result, and the impact of what we have and do with what we have that reflects the heart of the giver to others. This is how we share God deeply with the world. Paul invites us to examine what we have been given and why we are here.

I came to worship here over 11 years ago now. I want to tell you why I came back after my first visit. It was not the whopping number of members here, nor was it the prospect of worshipping in a would-be Cathedral. It is not geographically convenient for me to attend and I pass more churches than I can count to get here, even liturgical and sacramental ones. It was rather the mood of the worship and the obvious focus on God that caught both mind and heart. It was the sense that you truly cared that I had visited, but more so that you cared about the well-being of one another. It was the fact that outreach to those less fortunate was not lost upon you. It was even the fact that someone reached out to give me a Prayer Book and offered to help me find my way through should I not know how. And the way you prayed told me that you believed and held something to be true and dear. These are not simple banalities, nor are they self-serving actions. In my eyes they are gifts of the Spirit. The question is: what might we do and be if we are willing to see those gifts as opportunities to speak of the Love of God who comes hidden in such things?!

There is a story about St. Francis of Assisi who came upon a monk, Brother Juniper, one afternoon and found him terribly depressed and disconsolate. Francis inquired about his state and he replied that he was useless to the community and that no one wanted him. Brother Juniper was not the brightest light bulb in the chandelier. He was reported to be unable to be entrusted with the most common tasks. In fact, he even cooked rabbits for dinner once without removing the fur!! Francis had one reply, “Why Br. Juniper, you have the greatest gift of all; you have the gift of a loving heart.”

We are here today to be reminded that the gifts we bring are not valued because they are ours, but because they come from God, and because they do come from God they are not to be self-servingly used nor denigrated, but cherished for the good purposes God intends, and when that happens Christ is proclaimed as Lord. The bread and wine which we offer to God in the Mass are gifts he has already given us, everyday common place items, and he turns around and gives them back as his very body. So the good gifts of the Spirit found here at St. John's, when exercised and shared for the sake of others makes this Church a Sacrament of the Presence of God to the world. Brethren, I would not have you ignorant about spiritual gifts. They are from God and are our very life blood. Amen.