

THE GIFT-BASED CHURCH

I Corinthians 1:7

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

When 9 players on the Cincinnati Bengals football team are arrested in one season, when it seems credible that a marquee quarterback on another team would be guilty of marijuana possession, when any successful player on the baseball field is suspected of steroid use, and when people make three, four, or five million dollars or more a year for playing a sport, it makes even the most avid sports fan wonder if something might be wrong in this picture of sports in America.

It is certainly different from the picture I saw as a teenager over in Alamo, Georgia. After school there was always a group of us who gathered on the open lot next between the Pope House and the Cox house. In the Spring it became a baseball diamond with a base or two that looked more like a tree than a base sack. In the fall it became a football field with goal lines being marked on one end by the street and the other by the swing set. There were, of course, no uniforms. None were needed to know who was on what team. Some of us were older or younger than others. Some were guys. Some were girls. We just played until some adult hollered out the back door, "Supper," and then slowly and reluctantly the game began to disintegrate. Maybe it is this view which causes me to look at the world of baseball or football or basketball and wonder if something important is not indeed missing.

Sometimes we find ourselves with the same kind of thoughts and feeling as we see the church of our day. What we remember oftentimes seems different than it is today. The church of our memory might have been smaller, might have seemed more caring, might have been one of those where everyone knew everyone, might have had folks gathering around the piano after church on Sunday night for sing-a-longs, and might have even had a preacher who really preached the gospel like it is supposed to be preached. Maybe it was not really so different, but it often seems that way, nonetheless.

However, when we read the book of Acts and see the church in its beginning days, there does not seem to be any doubt that it is really is different today. Back then it really did seem to be centered around Jesus. The Holy Spirit was an obvious source of guidance and power. When we look at the church of the book of Acts and the church of today, we often find ourselves wondering what is wrong with this picture.

Our text for the day offers a description of the church which really does seem out of place today. In I Corinthians 1:7, the Apostle Paul speaks of the church by writing,

...you are not lacking in any spiritual gifts.

Here is a scriptural picture of the gift-based church. The gift-based church is a Jesus centered church which depends on the Holy Spirit to provide what is needed for the ministry God has put before it. It is at first glance a different looking church than the church of our day. In our day there is little emphasis placed on spiritual gifts. It is more of a topic of Bible study than a mode of operation for the church. It is something which generates a spirit of curiosity instead of a spirit of passion for the work of Christ in the world. In our day we depend on the way we have always done it, we depend upon structures and programs which speak of our past. Waiting on the Holy Spirit to direct the church forward by giving spiritual gifts for ministry seems like doing nothing and completely out of place. In this “take charge world” of ours, it often seems that today’s church senses no need for spiritual gifts. We have substituted our structures, our plans, our abilities, our intellect. The very term “spiritual gift” would point us toward the work of the Holy Spirit, but much of the time what we see in the church points us more toward our humanity

The promise of God in the scripture points us toward a different starting point. Today’s text says,

...you are not lacking in any spiritual gifts. (I Corinthians 1:7)

A little later in that same letter, in the 12th chapter, the Apostle Paul would write,

...there are varieties of gifts,...but it is the same Spirit who activates them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good....All these (gifts) are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allot to each one individually as the Spirit chooses. (I Cor. 12:4-11)

Romans 12:6 re-affirms this as it says,

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us...

In other place Ephesians 4:12 we are reminded again of the purpose of spiritual gifts as we hear the Word of God speaking of that purpose by saying,

...to equip the saints for work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

The problem the church has always faced is taking the Word of God seriously. To take the Word of God seriously means trusting God to do what He says He will do. As we read the scripture, we hear Him telling us He gives each believer in Jesus some spiritual gift for the building up of the body of Christ. He tells us we should not expect everyone to be blessed in the same way, only that we should expect everyone to be blessed in some way for the common good of the body of Christ. And, finally, He tells us that as we bring together our individual gifts for ministry, the church is not lacking in anything it needs to go forward in the world.

Here is a word which gives us a picture of how the church should look. Here is a picture of the church where nothing is missing. It is a picture which helps us see the divine intentions for the church in the beginning. In the beginning the church was a gift-based church where believers

embraced Spirit given gifts for ministry and trusted others to be gifted for different ministries so that the church could accomplish whatever it was that God wanted it to be about in the world.

Remember the story told of the twelve Hebrew spies a few weeks ago. Twelve men were sent into the Promised Land. Ten came back saying, "We cannot go forward," and two came back saying, "We must go forward." The people heeded the voice of the ten because they forgot that the issue was not about human effort, but instead it was about God's promise. Before the first of the ten set his foot in the Promised Land, the Lord had told Moses,

Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am
giving to the Israelites... (Numbers 13:1)

The picture of the gift-based church painted by the hand of the Spirit is like a promise to the church. It is as if God is saying, "This is the place I intend for you to inhabit." It is an amazing Word to which we respond either with belief or disbelief. Belief or trust says, "Yes, God can be trusted to keep His Word." Disbelief says either, "This will not work" or "Yes, God can be trusted to keep His Word, but we must make plans just in case He doesn't.." How I pray that this will be a day for us to say, "Yes, God can be trusted to keep His Word." How I pray that this will be a day for us of moving on toward the blessings that God has for His people who call themselves the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church.

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