

## ***One and Many***

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*Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church*

*Sunday, May 11, 2008; Bryn Mawr, PA*

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

*“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit...”*

Pentecost

### *Movement 1 – A Rainbow People*

Describe for me the typical Christian. What would your normal, average, middle of the bell curve Christian look like? Who would the typical, boring, run of the mill Christian be? Describe for me the typical Christian.

You can't do it can you? It is difficult, it is challenging to name and label the “typical” Christian. We may need to narrow it down, for there are Christians around the world, in every corner of the earth that all look different, speak differently, and worship in different ways. So let's make this task a little more manageable and narrow it down to just the United States. Just staying with this country, now, describe to me the typical Christian.

Yet there are a multitude of denominations, ethnicities, and other layers of diversity that muddle the mix of Christianity; perhaps we need to narrow it down again. Perhaps we need to weed out all of the Lutherans, the Mennonites, the Methodists, the Catholics and the Pentecostals. Let's narrow it down to just the Baptists, and for the sake of ease, let's say just the American Baptists. This smaller denomination of only one million people (give or take) will be our sample set. Now, staying just in America, staying just with American Baptists, describe to me the typical Christian.

Even that may seem to be daunting for we are a part of a denomination that has no racial majority. We are a mix of Hispanics, Europeans, Blacks, Asians, Native Americans and others. It is still too broad, and we need to narrow it down some more.

What if we just stick to this church? What if we stayed only within the walls of Lower Merion Baptist Church? Look at those who are here and now describe for me the typical Christian. Staying within the United States, staying within the American Baptists, staying within this church, describe for me the typical Christian. Can you do it?

We are a diverse people. This is the reality of our culture as a nation, as a group of faith, as a movement and even as a church. We are a multifaceted, multilayered people. Here, in the United States, we have people from many different ethnicities, from many different religious backgrounds, socio-economic backgrounds, geographic backgrounds and cultural backgrounds. We are not all NASCAR lovers, but some are. We do not all listen to NPR, but some do. We are not all fans of *American Idol* but some are. We do not all vote Democrat, or Republican, or Green Party or Libertarian Party but some do. We are a diverse group of people, who think differently, look different, speak differently and live differently. We are a diverse group of people.

Look around this church and you do not see just similarity and homogeneity. Look around this church and you find diversity. We have people here from different cultural, socio-economic, geographic backgrounds all worshipping together. We are a diverse people.

This is the reality of motherhood in America today; there is no one model of motherhood. There is diversity amongst mothers today. Some stay at home with their

children and others go to work in order to support their children. Some are single and others are married. Some are present and loving and others are distant. Some are grandparents taking on the role of motherhood and others are taking care of children which are not her own. There is not a singular model of the motherhood in America, it is a diverse landscape. We are a diverse people.

Paul is trying to remind the Corinthians of this in the section we have read from his first letter. Paul is trying to remind the people that they are diverse, they are not all the same, nor should they be. The Corinthian church was indeed a mixture of rich and poor, of homeowners and renters, of Jews and Greeks, slave and free, men and women. One could not look at the Corinthian church and describe the “typical” Christian. It was a diverse group of people.

If we can say one thing about Christianity with certainty and assurance it might be that we as Christians are different and diverse. Some Christians read the King James Bible, and others read the New Revised Standard Version. Some Christians pray extemporaneously for prolonged periods of time and find that very rewarding while others find a spiritual depth in the beautifully written liturgies that have been passed on through time. Some Christians find great depth and strength in the silence and the space of worship while others draw much from the noise of praise and proclamation of God’s glory. Christians in Ethiopia will be different from Christians in Malaysia. Christians in Germany will be different from Christians in Italy. Polish Christians in Poland will be struggling with different issues than Polish Christians in America. We are a diverse group of people.

The late theologian, James Wm. McClendon Jr., once wrote that theology is going to be diverse because it is going to reflect the community from which it comes. Theology must come out of the context of the community, and those contexts will vary. The theology of the church in Iraq will have notable nuanced differences from the church in Switzerland. The church in South Philadelphia will have a nuanced difference from the church in Paris, PA. Frederic Schleiermacher claimed that Protestant theology will always be different from Catholic theology because of the differences between the two movements. He did not mean this as a criticism, but as a realistic observation. We are diverse.

From our own particular families to our country to the world, we live amongst diversity. Like the colors of the rainbow, taking a single shaft of light and breaking it up into its many parts, we can take a single group of people (nation, church, and neighborhood) and find a rich diversity of people. We are indeed diverse.

*Movement 2 – We are automatic...we are homogenous*

Yet we try to achieve a singularity of culture, of appearance and of belief. We try to become the same people, living in the same kinds of houses, going to the same kinds of churches and believing the same kinds of things. Perhaps you have heard the song from the early sixties lampooning the growth of the suburban development. It is a song that is directly attacking an idea, a notion that similarity, that homogeneity is important for society.

*Little boxes on the hillside, Little boxes made of ticky-tacky*

*Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes all the same*

*There’s a green one and a pink one and a blue one and a yellow one*

*And they're all made out of tick-tacky and they all look just the same.*

(From "Little Boxes" by Malvina Reynolds)

The song is pointing out the urge that we feel, and we encounter towards conformity. We all need to live in our little boxes, to grow up and buy our own ticky-tacky boxes and all be the same. Some will be doctors, some will be lawyers but all will be the same. Little boxes on the hillside all looking the same.

One of the challenges of mother's day is to leave room for the "different" kind of mother. On mother's day, so often we are given a picture of June Clever as that perfect, that ideal mother. The mother who always looks primed and pressed, the mother who always has a good disposition, the mother who is soft-spoken and pleasant all the time is that mother that we all are to have or to be. The mother who makes the lunch of perfectly symmetrical sandwich slices with just the right proportion of peanut butter to jelly spread evenly on the Wonder bread, cut precisely and carefully placed in the well-folded paper bag. Social scholars and cultural critics call this the myth of the "perfect mother." It is the romanticized ideal of who the mother is supposed to be, how the mother is supposed to dress, live, raise children and be a dutiful and supportive wife. This is the vision; this is the model of motherhood that is still pushed and propagated in our society, this idea of the "perfect mother." It is a model that leaves out the single mother, the working mother, the single father, the recovering mother. It is a model that demands sameness, for a mother who can only emerge out of the little boxes made out of ticky-tacky, and so many are guilted and seduced into an aspiration for this model of motherhood. We all become the same.

When I asked you to describe the "typical" Christian, did you think of the average, sometimes attends church, prays only on Sunday afternoons when the Eagles are playing, believes in God and Jesus but is not crazy about it kind of Christian, because I think this is a picture of a large swath of Christianity in America. Or did you think of the clean cut, sweater-vest wearing, devoted, soft spoken, Bible quoting individual who is secure in his or her faith, who is a deacon or trustee and is a true leader for the church and the community? When we think of the "typical" Christian our collective imagination tends to move to what we think might be the "perfect" Christian. It is a myth of cultural Christianity that there is one way to be a Christian which is perfect, which is clean cut, which is sure and full of answers and does not waver on issues of faith. Think about the typical church, and our imagination tends to create the "perfect" church. The church that is not confrontational, is comforting to attend, is warm and welcoming and only demands our time on a Sunday morning and the occasional Wednesday evening. We are living with, influenced by a myth of the perfect Christian and the perfect church that pulls us towards a homogeneity, a monolithic movement of similarity and sameness.

In the early church, in the Corinthian church some were arguing for homogeneity of faith and belief. Some were arguing that one spiritual gift was better than others and all should adopt that gift. The "typical" Christian (read "perfect" Christian), should be able to speak in tongues. You should be able to let loose a whole paragraph of glossarial exposition without hesitating or thinking about it. The other gifts were fine, they were nice, but they fell under the ecstatic experience of speaking in tongues. It was a push towards homogeneity.

This is a vision of a church full of automatic robots, all moving in sync, all participating in the same way with the same focus. It was a level of conformity that called all to one focal point.

The urge of the Corinthians has not left the community of Christianity for there are many who would still argue that there is a specific way to be a Christian. Christians should pray in a specific way, read a specific bible (with the proper color cover), should sing specific hymns, should dress a certain way, talk a certain way, believe a certain way and live a certain way. Christians should walk in step, dress in uniform and speak a creed, a confession, a liturgy with the same monotone manner as all others around them. We need to all be the same. We need to aspire for the same gift from the Spirit. We need to conform and be the same.

Churches need to be the same. Churches should look the same, worship in the same way, have the same music, have similar preaching, and have the same kinds of choirs, programs and other activities. We need to always be looking over our shoulders and in front of us to see what others are doing so that we might copy them in their institutional life. We need to be the same.

This urge for conformity, this urge for homogeneity is powerful and persistent within humanity. From the Corinthians to today we are pulled to that same little box made out of ticky-tacky, all looking the same.

### *Movement 3 – The Fall of the Monolith*

Yet eventually, the monolith will fall. For that is what we are building, a monolith of conformity so that we can reach higher and higher in our similarities. We are building a towering monolith of homogeneity that reaches up to the heavens. Eventually the monolith will fall. Eventually someone will get uncomfortable. Eventually someone will begin to get restless and start to question. Eventually someone will start to wonder if there might be a different or a better way. Think of Guy Montag, the protagonist from *Fahrenheit 451*. He believed with the rest of society that books were dangerous and should be burned until he met someone who challenged this thought. His acceptance of societal norms began to crumble and fall as he began to realize that much could be offered in books.

Think of Winston Smith from Orwell's classic *1984*. For such a long time he truly believed that Big Brother was good, he conformed and tried to fit in. Yet there were a group of people, a group of individuals who questioned and wondered and pushed. The monolith began to fall.

In the Corinthian church there may have been individuals with a gift for wisdom, or for healing, or for the discernment of spirits but not for speaking in tongues. Maybe some of these individuals felt bad about themselves because they lacked the gift. Maybe they looked at others who could speak in tongues, who were lifted up and portrayed as important and wanted that same honor, but could not gain it. Yet maybe some of them began to get restless and began to question the monolithic society created by a few. Maybe some of them looked at their own gifts and no longer saw themselves as lesser than others. Individuals in the community began to demand that their gifts be noticed and valued. The monolith began to fall.

Utah Phillips once said, "You've got to own what you do, rather than work and let somebody else make the profit off of it. And you've got to fight in this culture to hang

on to your soul, to hang on to your own creativity.” We are pulled to the center of the bell curve. We are pulled to the center of similarity, but with time we begin to wrestle, struggle and the monolith begins to fall. The monolith begins to fall when we realize that we cannot be the perfect Christian that we are fed by a wider, prevailing culture. The monolith begins to fall when we realize that we cannot be the perfect church. The monolith begins to fall when we say no to the pull and the pressure and begin to name and claim who we truly and honestly are. The monolith falls, the homogeneity breaks apart and the reality of the diversity which is rises to the surface. The monolith begins to fall.

#### *Movement 4 – The Gorilla Gives Gifts*

We are a diverse people. This is the reality of who we are, yet our diversity goes deeper than our background, our ethnicities, our socio-economic context. Our diversity is blessed and brought out by the grace of God. Through the grace of God, through the actions of the Holy Spirit, we have all received gifts, different, diverse and in our diversity, we need to claim our gifts. It is one thing to name our diversity on the surface level, yet we are called to name our diversity on a deeper, spiritual level. We need to say, this is who I am as a child of God and a follower of Jesus Christ, and this is what I do well through the grace of God.

Paul reminds the Corinthians about the role of the Spirit and the diversity of the community. Paul reminds the Corinthians how they have received their gifts from the Holy Spirit. There are a variety of gifts just as there are a variety of people. Some have received the gift of wisdom, and others received the gift of knowledge. Some have received the gift of faith and others the gift of healing. Some have received the gift of miracles and others the gift of prophecy. There are a variety of gifts, all given by the Spirit. They are a diverse community through the actions of the Holy Spirit.

God does not want us to be one, similar, all in lock-step, but calls us to embrace our diversity by giving out gifts through which we can minister.

It is like the wizard of Oz reaching into his bag and pulling out a diploma, a medal and a clock heart, giving different gifts to the travelers of Dorothy’s band. The wizard does not give a diploma to the lion or a medal of courage to the tin man. He gives the gifts appropriate to band of travelers and each are different. Gifts are given, proportioned for the travelers.

This is part of the role of the Holy Spirit, to give gifts for ministry. Remember that today, as well as being mother’s day (and rural life Sunday), is also Pentecost. Today is the day when we consider and celebrate the birth of the church. Pentecost is often a forgotten day of celebration even though it is one of the big three (Christmas and Easter being the other two). I submit that Pentecost is often missed and overlooked because it has not been secularized enough. The Hallmark Card Company has not yet begun selling Pentecost greeting cards and dancing Pentecost mascots. We don’t buy chocolate or put on our bonnet for Pentecost. In order to save Pentecost I am suggesting a mascot. Christmas has Santa Clause, Easter has the bunny, and Pentecost needs something that the secular world, the greeting card industry can embrace. I suggest the Pentecost gorilla. This would be a gorilla with red fur that would go from person to person and leave gifts. Maybe bananas or coconuts filled with goodies or something else, but every Pentecost, this gorilla would go from Christian to Christian and offer these gifts. Scholars point out

that the Greek in verse 8 and on for what the Holy Spirit is doing is the idea of “proportioning” The Holy Spirit is proportioning gifts for all of the believers. So you can imagine this mascot handing out spiritual gifts left and right. Maybe he would give you the gift of spiritual discernment. Maybe he would give you the gift of speaking in tongues. Maybe he would give you the gift of healing or of faith. Open your hands close your eyes and get ready for your gifts as the big, red, 400 pound gorilla prances around touching each of us and filling us with the holy, the divine gifts.

Obviously I am being somewhat flip. Obvious I am attacking the secularization of the other major days of celebration, yet I am still making a point. These gifts, these spiritual gifts, we do not work to acquire them, instead we are give them. Like that gorilla running around and offering gifts, we are handed gifts from the Lord through the Holy Spirit. We can try to attain our own. We can study and study and hope we acquire the gift of knowledge, but without the proportion of the Holy Spirit, we will only get so far. We can try and we can try to speak in tongues, and may even be able to fake it to a point, but without the Holy Spirit, we will not say much. We can work to improve what we do not have but only to a point, for they are all gifts of the Spirit.

This is the diversity of the church, the diversity of Christianity. Not just social, not just economic, not just geographic, but with the gifts that you and I have. Some can preach and others can pray. Some can study and teach and others can learn and grow. Some can listen and others can speak. We have a diversity of gifts, diversity in the church that is the foundation of the church. From the one Spirit, from the one God, from the one Lord we all receive different gifts as believers. We, as believers, are diverse.

#### *Movement 5 – We are....the church*

In the collage of diversity, in the mixture of difference, we will be the church, one, holy, blessed by the Spirit, and gathered by God. We will have our unity, we will be brought together but not because of the way we look, nor because of the way we live, the way we pray, or the way to express our Christianity. We will be one because of the binding love of God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We embrace this with our initial action of faith. With our baptism we embrace the one Lord, Jesus Christ, whom we all follow. As we are reminded in Ephesians, we have one Lord, one Faith and one Baptism. We are reminded through our baptism that we are part of one body, the body of Christ, with its many members. The differences are washed away through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, through the baptism of our Lord. Jews and Greeks, slaves or free, mothers or fathers, brothers or sisters, liberals or conservatives, protestant or Catholic, Baptist or Methodists or Lutherans or whatever, black or white, male or female, we are all one through the power of the Holy Spirit. We all drink of that same Spirit which unites us, which draws us together. We are one.

Yet we maintain our individuality. It is like being a part of a marching band. We are all walking in the same direction, we are playing the same song, and we may all be wearing similar uniforms, yet we are playing our own instruments. Some are part of the 76 trombones, some are a part of those hundred and ten cornets, rows and rows of the finest virtuosos marching together under the banner of Jesus Christ. What we are striving for is a parachoritic approach to the church. An approach that looks to an “indwelling” of person and community. Just as the Trinity is a relationship of three persons and one God, we are to strive to have a relationship that honors our diversity and yet strives for

uniformity in our faith. A kind of dance when no one leads but all are a part of the same music and the same beat.

This is the church, with our individuality, with our unity. We are the church, a cacophonous mix of different people from different places all walking with Christ. We are the church, no one person is any more important, but all are children of God. We are the church, blessed, lifted and led by the Holy Spirit. We are the church, the blessed followers of our one Lord, of Jesus Christ.

### *Movement 6 – Use*

What is your gift? Name and claim your gifts and then use your gifts. Use the gifts you have received. Use the gifts you have received through the Holy Spirit. Use the gifts you have received. We need to push ourselves out of the model, out of the paradigm that everything needs to be the same. We need to push ourselves out of the idea that everyone should be doing the same thing, that all mothers need to be the same, that all Christians need to be the same, and that all churches need to be the same. The Holy Spirit has given each of us gifts; we need to use them.

We have so many mothers in worship today. We have so many individuals who have given so much love, who have sacrificed so much time and energy and devotion to her children, but each one does it differently. Each one is a different kind of mother and all are blessed by God. Each one is given the gift of motherhood by the Lord but in a specific way and all is blessed by God. Be the mother that you are called to be.

We have a church full of Christians with different gifts and different callings. Name and claim your gift. Offer thanks to the Holy Spirit for your gift and then use it for the glory of the Lord. Don't look over your shoulder and try to be like the person next to you. Don't try to copy the long and flourishing prayers of someone else. Don't try to quote scripture like the person in Sunday school. Find your gift, name your gift and hone it, perfect it and use it. This is so important because we are all given gifts and calling by the Lord through the Holy Spirit. We all have gifts and callings and we can let them go dormant and atrophy or we can grow in our gifts. If you have the gift of healing, then learn your craft and engage opportunities of ministries so you can practice your craft; embrace your gift. If you have the gift of knowledge, then study, learn and grow in what you know; use your gift. If you have the gift of preaching, then don't hold back but preach. If you have the gift of praying, then don't hold back but pray. If you have the gift of exhorting and sharing then do so. Use your gifts, use what God has given to you, become who God has called you to be. Use your gifts.

Do you believe that you have been given a gift for ministry?

Do you believe that you have been given a gift to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Do you believe that you have been given a gift to do justice?

Do you believe that you have been given a gift to show mercy?

Do you believe that you have been given a gift to show the love of our Lord?

We have been given gifts, name them, claim them and live into them as you have received them.

Let us be the church that we are called to be, not the church that others tell us to be. Let us open our hands, take the gifts from the Holy Spirit as they are given to us, and

be the church that God is calling us to be. Lower Merion Baptist, we are a unique church with a unique ministry, but we cannot fully live into that ministry, we cannot fully be the church, the specific church that God is calling us to be unless each and every person lives into their one specific gift from the Holy Spirit. Yet when we all live into the gifts we have received, then we will be the church we are called to be. We will work with other churches, we will witness and worship and serve with other Christians, yet all the while we will be Lower Merion Baptist Church, in our own unique way.

Be the person that you have been called to be. Serving the Lord. Serving your brothers and sisters but as you have the gifts to serve. Let us go and live and serve in our diversity, in our unity showing the power of the cross.

AMEN