

Using Every Crayon in the Box

1 Corinthians 12: 4-12

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Did you know? Martin Luther King, Jr. once wrote a letter imagining he was St. Paul writing to our American churches. It is called, “Paul’s Letter to American Christians.” In it, pseudo St. Paul acknowledges that we have made great strides in science and technology but wonders if the same holds true for our spirituality and morality. He applauds the fact that we were able to make the world as small as a neighborhood, but laments that we have failed to make of it a brotherhood (or sisterhood). He asks American Christians, how it is that there is more integration in the entertainment industry and in our secular society than there is within the Christian church itself? It is the same question the real St. Paul is wrestling with in Corinth. How is the oneness of the Body of Christ so segregated?

Begin by pondering the question: how is segregation possible in the Body of Christ? How has the church that was born through the birth canal of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, a church which began as a mosaic of diverse cultures all worshiping under the same roof; how has this church become one of the most segregated institutions in the nation? What happened? Maybe, we are tempted to chalk it up to cultural differences. Do you remember a couple years ago, during our year long conversation with PIRD, our inter-racial dialogue group that met in our fellowship hall? We made lists on giant poster boards, naming all the things that form us as a people in different ways: music, food, language, even our traditions in churches. We realized that some things don’t jive cross-culturally. Imagine if you grew up in a church where every Sunday the preacher got all revved up, wiping the sweat from his forehead. The organ player gets amped up in the Spirit and BOOM! the choir rips into a four-part harmony of “We Are One in the Spirit!” And people are clapping and waving their hands in the air. The children are shaking their egg shakers, dancing in the aisles. The congregation is shouting out, “Amen!” Imagine if that was the experience on a typical Sunday. And then one day you get invited to a little Presbyterian church on Bolton Street where most of those things—alright none of those things—happen. A church where you can tell the Holy Spirit is present, not based on how responsive people are, but based on how quiet people get. Maybe our churches are segregated because we simply prefer different ways of worshiping and culturally, we aren’t the same. Maybe.

But we know better. We know the issue is 400 years deeper. There are systems at work. Laws are written. Walls are being negotiated. There are highways cutting through the heart of our cities dividing us. And for 400 years most of our churches have defended the status quo, or we have consoled these systems through our silence. One of our former General Assembly moderators recalls when he was a child attending a large Presbyterian church where his father was the pastor. The church absorbed an African American Presbyterian church that had closed. It was in 1965 during the heights of the civil rights era. He remembers the presence of the members from the black church did not alter the white church's political landscape. It did not influence the church's engagement in the civil rights movement. He now wonders how the church's silence impacted the lives and faith of those black members. For 400 years our country has been stamped by racism. For 400 years our churches have waffled. We may want to chalk it up to cultural difference, but we know better. There are systems at work aimed at keeping us apart while our churches for the most part have remained complicit and silent.

So now let's take a breather. Ask the question: where does Martin Luther King's dream of an integrated church and society come from? Hint: It does not come from a liberal arts Ivy League school on the east coast. It does not trickle down as a policy promoted on a Bernie Sanders campaign. Where does it come from? Does it not come straight from our bibles? As St. Paul ponders what the coming of Christ means for all of us, he reminds the church that we are baptized into *one* baptism. We belong to *one body and one Spirit*. And in our baptism, all the gender divisions between male and female: gone! All the religious division between who God favors and who is left in the cold: gone! All the economic divisions between the slave caste system and the free are being washed away. There was a pastor who served a multi-cultural church. Whenever she would baptize an African American baby she would say, "Now there are systems in society that will try to tell you that you are not as valuable. There are people who will treat you wrongly because of the color of your skin. But you are now a part of God's family and as a beloved child *that is your deepest identity.*" And whenever she would baptize a white baby she would say, "There are structures in place that will tell you that you are more important than others. You were born into privilege and will be told you hit a home run. But you are now a part of God's family and as a beloved child *that is your deepest identity.*" In the waters of our baptism, says St. Paul, all the walls society tries to erect, all the moats dug between us are being leveled out and washed away. We are raised up as a new creation, called to be a new kind of people. When Dr. King says that we are all woven into a single garment of destiny he is drawing his understanding from the heartbeat of the gospel. It is God's word to us: We belong to one baptism. One Spirit. One body.

Well, before we despair, know that God doesn't leave us unequipped. Every one of us has been given gifts that we are expected to use to help mend the body in unity. And when one part of the body is suffering, the rest of the body responds. A couple years ago I tore a tendon in my inner elbow—I'm getting old. At first my body responded by sending blood with healing nutrients to the area. Inflammation flooded to protect the injury. But I neglected the tear and ignored it, hoping it would go away on its own. And after neglecting the injury for about a year, do you know what the body did? The body began to think the fissure was the new normal. Except after a year, I couldn't stand the pain anymore, so the doctor injected a shot into the area of my own plasma to reawaken the body—to get blood flowing back into the injured area and promote healing once again. Friends, does not the church need a Spirit-infused shot in the arm these days? The Body needs to be reawakened to the reality that the segregation we experience in the Body of Christ is *not* normal. It is why we, as a predominantly white church,

unapologetically say, “Black Lives Matter!” It is why we wrote an anti-racism statement to support it. Because when one part of the body is suffering, the rest of the body responds. So some of us use our gifts to teach each other. Others offer wisdom. Others speak prophetically. Some gifts might be more charismatic—offering healing touch or even speaking in Spirit speech. Whatever it is, God has given us the gifts to be used to bring the body together in unity.

In our city, we have one of the worst child-poverty rates in the U.S. Some of our schools rank the lowest in the country. One out of four children are hungry. This is our system.

There are still officers who are acquitted, even though they tried to cover up the police shooting of a young black man in Chicago who was shot sixteen times *in the back*. The shooter himself got a measly eighty-one months jail time for the crime. With good behavior he will be out in three years. There are black people serving three times that sentence for smoking marijuana. This is our system.

There are still death threats being send to leaders of color in our city because they have vocalized that it is time to remove the confederate statue from our downtown district. This is our system.

Some of you have been given a part of a picture to color with a crayon. It is only one piece of the picture, but together it creates a whole. So too it is with the body of Christ. God uses all the crayons in the box to help color in a new picture of what is possible for our world. We belong to one baptism, one body, one Spirit. And the church cannot in good faith or conscience be silent about racism anymore. Amen.



***What our collaborative coloring created*