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1 Corinthians 12:1-11

My heart was warmed to read our gospel lesson for today. It was the gospel for Jeff and my wedding, about three and a half years ago. Jesus' miracle of turning water into wine is the first miracle in the book of John. It is a sign of who Jesus is – the Christ, the Son of God.

Many of us – or most of us – may find it hard to know what to do with any of Jesus' miracles in the gospels. Why don't I see God working miracles like this? Is God still in the miracle business these days? If so, are they more than party tricks?

The answer to these last two questions is yes. But it is helpful for us to look for answers in another lesson. Saint Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, which points toward one of the miracles that God brings among us.

Saint Paul's letter to his congregation in Corinth, about their church and the Christian life of faith. He started their congregation several years earlier. They had been having problems and wrote to him for help. Some of their troubles don't seem to be big at Emanuel's – they had issues with blatant immorality. Yet others hit awfully close to home, as they do for most churches. The Corinthian church had major divisions in their community. They were quarreling with one another. There

were power struggles. People were marginalized from the fellowship, for reasons that had little to do with the gospel. Emanuel's has had our own divisions in recent months, though the details were quite different. In the words of old, Paul speaks to us today, as we begin a new year in our life of faith.

Paul called the Corinthians to consider what the church is at its foundation. According to him, church is a group of people who confess Jesus as Lord, by the power of the Holy Spirit. *(1 Cor 12:3)* It is the ultimate baseline. Nothing else – the worship, the people, the ministries, the communion – would exist without that basic fact.

In Paul's words, we hear another fundamental part of the church's identity. Gathered around Jesus as Lord, the church is blessed by the presence of Christ's Holy Spirit. Church is a group of spiritual people who are taught, enlivened, and guided by the Holy Spirit. We don't tend to talk about it much as Lutherans. But the third article of the Apostles' Creed is grouped together for a reason. It begins, "I believe in the Holy Spirit..." It proceeds to mention some of ways that the Spirit acts in our lives – through "the holy catholic Church," by knitting us into "the communion of saints," by granting us "forgiveness of sins," by resurrecting our bodies, and by granting us everlasting life.

The Christian life, the spiritual life, is one that receives many gifts through the Holy Spirit. There are the huge gifts to all believers, which are mentioned in the Apostles' Creed. And there are the gifts given to us as individuals and as communities. Talents and passions which God gives us at creation. God blesses them in us at our baptisms, and nurtures them throughout our lives. Paul named a list of them – wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discernment, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues. It covers a nice range, though we could probably add some more.

Our text does not sound challenging or harsh at all. But one of the problems of the church at Corinth was that they celebrated the gift of speaking in tongues above others. This was the means of a power struggle and the cause of some of their divisions.

In response, Paul wrote, “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.” *(1 Cor 12:4-6)*

Paul reminded them that there is not a hierarchy of God's gifts. One is not a greater gift than others. They all come from the same Spirit. From the same God who was revealed in Jesus Christ. One of the beautiful things about these gifts is that they are not intended to be used just for an individual's glory.

Paul wrote, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (12:7) The gifts that God creates and nurtures in us have a purpose. They are to be shared with the community. They are to be used in service to others. Any glory that shines would be directed toward the giver of all good gifts – toward God in Christ Jesus.

The challenge for the Corinthians, and for us, is our Christian life together. How do we live, united by Christ with all our differences? How do we live, in ways that welcome the gifts of the Spirit in one another?

It’s hard. In theory, we want to receive one another, and the movement of God among us. And the gathering of the church is a special group for a bunch of reasons. Our society is very compartmentalized. The people who we see are folks in our socio-economic class, our age or generation, our occupation, our race, our political leanings. In America, the church is still bound by racial divisions. But most congregations draw together people from many different walks of life. With all our differences, we may have different things that we cherish about our church. We may have different ideas of “the common good” of our congregation. We may wonder about particular ways to share our spiritual gifts with the church. Often it is these – our conflicting visions and hopes and desire to share our gifts – that are

most charged with emotion in our life together. There will always be tensions in our human relationships. Wherever we gather in groups, we will have disagreements and conflicts. There are no perfect people. There are no perfect churches.

Paul knew all of our struggles. He calls us to our foundation as Christians. Jesus Christ is at the root of our identity and lives. He is in, with, and under all the other things of church – the relationships, the worship, the programs. He is the one who makes our life together possible. The presence of his Spirit enables us to live together and be blessed by (not plagued by) our differences. And it's not that life together is always easy... but that promise is nowhere in the Bible.

Our Father and Creator invites us and others in, so that our community has the gifts from God that it most needs. The Holy Spirit works to build us up in faith, hope, and love – even when we're not sure how. She speaks to us through the word. Guides us to acts of forgiveness and reconciliation. The Spirit slowly reveals to us how we can live into God's vision for our world as a church. This is one of the miracles that God brings of us and among us, here and now.

The Spirit draws us, both lifelong members and new arrivals, to be together. Responding to the God's healing touch in our relationships. Receiving God's grace through one another's gifts. Finding ways to serve Christ together. Knitting us together as the people of God. What a wonderful miracle!