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3 Epiphany C

“Answer Readily the Call”

(taking something apart & when put back together there are parts that one does not remember....)

Luke strings together three passages from Isaiah and in those words from Old Testament prophecy the mission of Jesus as Messiah is revealed. The word from Jesus, from God, is all inclusive. He came to be a herald of joy to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and oppressed, to bring sight to the blind, and to “*proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” The poor were not just the economically deprived but anyone who found themselves on the margins of society. Jesus does not interpret the prophecy from Isaiah but rather he fulfills it. God’s work of deliverance was being accomplished in that moment, not in the distant future. The Kingdom of God was fully present in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. All spiritual gifts were contained in this one man, Jesus of Nazareth. He is our model of community building. He is the ‘unity’ around which His Church exists.

You and I gathered today are the body of Christ. Whenever God’s Word is read before the community Jesus’ words come to life, “*Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*” When is a body not a body? Paul takes the word of the Kingdom of God and puts flesh on it. Someone

asked in our Bible Study on Tuesday about Paul's letters and their intent and means of travel. Paul says "*Now concerning spiritual gifts*" which indicates that the issue has been raised by someone's letter or correspondence with him. The way Paul proceeds in his answer indicates what must have been asked of him.

Can't you just imagine that someone must have indicated that some 'spiritual gifts are somehow more important than others. How does this Holy Spirit thing really work in different people, in different ways? In the first century world supernatural events were not uncommon. What is supernatural and what is not? I think of Kent and Lorraines' granddaughter whose ear seemed to be coughing up coins with the help of John Ernst. She said to me, "He found a quarter and a nickel in my ear!" It certainly seemed 'supernatural' to the little girl. Pagan healings of some kind had occurred and continued in even greater ways in the Christian meetings. What were the differences?

Paul does not answer this question in terms of the enthusiasm of those leaving a meeting. Emotions could not be counted on as an adequate criterion for judgment in this matter. Feelings fluctuate. Paul was not dependent on the individual but on one thing and one thing only for fulfillment of one's gifts; "Jesus is Lord" was outside one's feelings.

Wherever a community confesses and lives out that reality, there the Spirit of the Lord is in control. The question is not ‘what happened’ but rather it is ‘in whose name has this occurred?’

The first mark of the Holy Spirit’s presence is seen in the community’s confession of Jesus’ Lordship. Today Paul turns to “*gifts.*” Perhaps these new Christians were arguing about what should be counted as “*gifts.*” Or maybe they thought that if one were ‘filled with the Spirit’ all ‘gifts’ should be at your beck and call. Paul makes three simple, yet significant, points.

First, many different gifts were to be found within a Christian community. They ran the gamut from eye-catching miracles to simple acts of helpful service. God had seen to their distribution in such a way that every Christian had received at least some measure of ‘gift.’ No one possessed all the gifts possible. This godly distribution principle has to do with moving us out of our own self assured independence into a mutual dependence. God intends that we are never at our best unless we are involved in the give and take of human community. No Lone Rangers allowed!

Second, the apostle emphasized that, no matter what the gifts, it was the same Spirit at work in them all. God is going to move us from comfort to dependence. What is your greatest strength? Is there any humility connected

with it? Gifts that impress others --- well we have no problem attributing those to the Spirit. But “simple” gifts that express themselves in quiet, unassuming service to the neighbor --- these we are too ready to write off as being unimportant. FOR PAUL , EVERY GIFT WAS EQUALLY INSPIRED! Each of you has a gift inspired by the Holy Spirit and each is a reminder that without this ‘gifted’ presence one is not Christian. It is part of God’s promise to you. It is by God’s grace that you “live and move and have your being.” We are all very ‘ordinary’ regardless of our gift. If there are congratulations to be made make them to God!

Third, Paul insists that all gifts, regardless of size and scope, have one purpose, which we stated earlier; the common good. If gifts are not used to build up the community, they are being misused. This is the most interesting part of Paul’s word to us for he uses the human body to explain God’s purpose for us. Can you imagine a body whose parts are not content to be what God created them to be? (GI Joe , Santa’s helper) How could it continue to function if one of its parts opposed another out of jealousy, disappointment or desire to get even? God knows what makes the human organism productive more so than we know. In a marvelous way the Lord linked together variety and unity so that each should support the other. Have you ever thought what the human body would look like if you designed it? It

would not be for the common good but for your biased and uninformed design. Without a single entity called “body” to coordinate and direct the diversity, there would be chaos.

Every church, every ‘body of Christ’, has been fitted out by the Lord with a marvelous array of gifts. Rick Warren would refer to this in terms of his good work, The Purpose Driven Church. None is to be despised. The tragedy of a congregation which splits because of internal entanglements is that it is because of a ‘few’ who are selfishly calling their ‘gifts’ more necessary or are simply ignoring the gifts of the masses. All are designed to function for the well-being of the body. The idea that all believers should manifest specific gifts if they are to be counted true Christians or the related notion that some gifts are more “God-given” than others are both unthinkable. Certain gifts may be more important for the functioning of the body than others. But, even then, compensation is built in. Just as in the human body we bestow greater honor on our more unseemly parts by clothing them, Paul says, so should it be in the church. Weaker and humbler Christians are to receive special honor. Those whose gifts seem less impressive or whose faith appears to be more doubt-ridden, upon them God expects the well-gifted to lavish greater attention. In this way, all the gifts

will receive equal honor and so the whole community will be built up in love. [Sigel]

Every gift represented here is significant to God and to the wellbeing of the whole. And you know, if one suffers all suffer and if one rejoices we all rejoice. We are ONE in Christ. God's mission calls us to honor and respect all members of the Body of Christ. Seems to me that our Baptism has a related promise doesn't it?

This week across the world we have been celebrating "Christian Unity." That 'unity' requires each of us to explore and utilize our gifts. It calls us to stay in community as the utmost sign of Jesus' words of fulfillment. It calls us to recognize all gifts and to know that the same Spirit is working in each of us for the common good. When you are mad, disgruntled, despairing, ready to go to some place that seems 'easier' from the outside, know and remember that God's gifts can be found where you are and in time will defend and support you.

Discover and utilize your 'gift' here for the good work God intends that you do for all of us. Amen.