
THE COMMON GOOD

1 COR 12:1-11

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 16, 2022,
BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

On this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, I remember that the Rev. Dr. King's primary identity was being a Christian preacher. And there is one preaching moment from my first year in seminary that I will never forget. One weekday in Princeton Theological Seminary's Miller Chapel, the preacher of the day spoke of the Holy Spirit many times. As this senior-class student preached, he interjected the phrase, "Help me, Holy Ghost!" One time. Two times. Three times—and then I lost count of how many times he said, "Help me, Holy Ghost!" Maybe he was praying for himself in that moment because he realized that the sermon wasn't going over too well. Maybe he thought if he said "Holy Ghost" ten times that would make his sermon more Spirit-filled and cause us, the listeners, to actually pay more attention to his sermon. But saying "Holy Ghost" or "Holy Spirit" does not guarantee that one is in the Spirit, led by the Spirit, or bearing the fruit of the Spirit. We might be in what former Harvard professor Harvey Cox calls "the age of the Spirit" but to linguistically play off of a Spiritual, "Everybody talkin' 'bout the Spirit, ain't got the Spirit."

Sitting in holy shock that morning in Princeton, we began to silently affirm this preacher's prayer and say our own version of it: "Help him, Holy Ghost. Help him and that sermon." And we said our own, "Help me, Holy Ghost"—meaning, "Help me endure what is being said." As the preacher continued, it became increasingly clearer that something was sorely wrong, and our shock reached its unforgettable peak when the preacher announced to us, "You won't praise God because you're just mean." It didn't seem to occur to him that maybe meanness was not the reason we didn't praise God but, rather, because the sermon was a smelly linguistic version of hate. He had unknowingly performed rhetorical terrorism and dropped a homiletical weapon of mass destruction, which left many hearers thinking the Spirit was all about death, rather than life, all for harm and not for good.

Through the eyes of discernment, I don't think the Holy Ghost answered his prayer during his sermon on that day. But our prayer as students was finally answered and we were helped when he finished the sermon and sat down. This doesn't mean that we fully understood what happened that morning; indeed, some of us who were there are still searching for the black box--as they have in airplanes--from that sermon to see what actually went wrong on that morning in Miller Chapel. There's nothing wrong with saying, "Help me, Holy Ghost." It is a good and right prayer for the Spirit but the challenge for us is whether we engage in the right practice of the Spirit.

This is where the Apostle Paul comes in. He had to remind the church at Corinth, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." The church wrestled with Paul over the role of the Spirit in their community. They thought they were truly spiritual, yet their communal ethic was lacking. Some flaunted their gifts like *glossolalia* and created a hierarchy of spirituality to the detriment of the church's life together. This is where Paul steps in to teach that each person has a gift of the Spirit and is of value and those gifts are for the common good. Paul's thesis statement to this church is laid out from the beginning of his letter, let "there be no divisions among you, but ... be united in the same mind and the same purpose." Paul is about unity in the same Spirit. He knew that divisive behavior and promoting divisions, inside or outside the church, were not of the Spirit of God but of other spirits.

The way of the Spirit is always for the common good, always for a love that builds up a community, never tearing it down, no matter how spiritual you think you are. It's like what happens in Acts at Pentecost, where all who believe were together and "had all things in common." The common is where the Spirit resides.

"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Of course, there are varieties of people, but all are children of God. "Varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ... varieties of services, but the same

Lord; ...varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” Variety but the same root. Variety but the same source, the same spirit. In the church, there are variations on a theme and for the church and Paul that theme is Jesus Christ is Lord. What he’s saying is that we are more alike than different, even with all of our variations. That’s why as Christians we should search for the common, work for the common, because this is the way of the Spirit.

There are many church denominations, but believe or not, the same Spirit is at work in them all. Difference of opinion or theology or interpretation or practice doesn’t make a person or a group evil. In 1956, at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Dr. King preached a sermon called “Paul’s Letter to American Christians.” He said, “The tragedy is not so much that you have such a multiplicity of denominations, but that most of them are warring against each other with a claim to absolute truth. This narrow sectarianism is destroying the unity of the Body of Christ. You must come to see that God is neither a Baptist nor a Methodist; He is neither a Presbyterian nor an Episcopalian. God is bigger than all of our denominations. If you are to be true witnesses for Christ, you must come to see that America.”

In our time, we are seeing denominational, political, racial, economic factions and splinters but our gifts as Christians come from the same source and are meant to serve the common good and build up the community in love. If our manifestation or gift of the Spirit does not help the common good, we have to ask ourselves whether what we’re doing or saying is of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit doesn’t divide, but the Spirit unifies. The source of our gifts is common, and the aim of our gifts is building our common life together. James Dunn in his book *Theology of Paul the Apostle* says, “the test of charism is it’s benefit to the community.”

No matter how often you shout in praise or how many times you do the sign of the cross, who are your gifts helping? Our gifts, our resources are not for ourselves but for the whole community. Why wouldn’t we work for the common good as a sign of the Spirit in our lives if we acknowledge to be true these words of Dr. King in the final chapter of what became his final book?

“Whether we realize it or not, each of us lives eternally ‘in the red.’ We are everlasting debtors to known and unknown men and women. When we arise in the morning, we go into the bathroom where we reach for a sponge which is provided for us by a Pacific islander. We reach for soap that is created for us by a European. Then at the table we drink coffee which is provided for us by a South American, or tea by a Chinese or cocoa by a West African. Before we leave for our jobs, we are already beholden to more than half of the world. In a real sense, all life is interrelated. The agony of the poor impoverishes the rich; the betterment of the poor enriches the rich. We are inevitably our brother’s keeper because we are our brother’s brother. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”

King reminds us that we are connected like a body as we hear in 1 Corinthians. “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” We should work for the common good because we care and love in the one Spirit.

Yet we struggle with seeing and working for the common good. Often, we are more worried about our individual freedoms rather than the impact of our actions on others. This is the influence of the Enlightenment and the individual self as the center of the universe—“I think therefore I am” rather than a more communal understanding of the self which is more akin to the gospel— “I am because we are.” “To each is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good,” not for the solo self.

In his Nobel Prize Lecture in December 1964, Dr. King speaks truth that is relevant even for our time—“in spite of ... spectacular strides in science and technology, and still unlimited ones to come, something basic is missing. There is a sort of poverty of the spirit which stands in glaring contrast to our scientific and technological abundance. The richer we have become materially, the poorer we have become morally and spiritually. We have learned to fly the air like birds and swim the sea like fish, but we have not learned the simple art of living together as

brothers.” We can go to space and pay millions of dollars to do so, and still not make space for each other. What happened to the common good?

The church will not be the church of Jesus in the power of the Spirit if we do not serve the common good, if we don't seek the good of all, if we don't work and pray for real community. If we don't, it will only reveal that we are poor in spirit even empty of the Spirit no matter how much we declare that we are spiritual like a member of the Corinthian church.

Only the Spirit can broaden the borders of our hearts, our relationships, our social outreach, our sense of community, and social justice for the common good. It's only the Spirit of Christ that can do this because it's how the Spirit works.

When the power of the Spirit falls on the disciples to be witnesses in Acts, (Acts 1:8), it is to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. The Spirit always takes us beyond ourselves to a wider circle, beyond our bloodline, beyond our DNA, beyond our affinity groups, beyond our race, beyond our gender, beyond our class, to the stranger, to the enemy, to the outcast, to the weak, to the vulnerable, pushing our boundaries beyond our singular self, and toward and for the common good. 'The common good' is a wider perspective revealing the scope of the gospel of Jesus Christ and it's the aim of life in the Spirit. If we are not for the common good, our Christianity is no good.

Dr. King lived in the Spirit of Christ for the common good which is why in his speech at the Riverside Church, New York City on April 4, 1967, he could say this:

“On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth.”

What ever happened to the common good? “To each is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good,” beyond what's just good for me and my family or neighborhood or my click, but what is good for all of us in the collective human body. As one gospel song says: “It is his/Christ's will that every need be supplied, you are important to me, I need you to survive.” This is the way of the Spirit, and in this warped world, we need the Spirit now, for the good of all, in our hearts, in our churches, and in the world. That seminary sermon might have been off, but his prayer was spot on. Let that be our prayer in 2022 as we seek the common good: “Help us, Holy Ghost.”