

Sermon: For the Common Good

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, January 19, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Somewhere along my educational journey, I came to resent group projects. I don't recall when, or if there was a specific project that had triggered me, I simply came to resent participating in group projects. It did not matter how a group was formed, or if students were assigned. It did not matter how instructions were given or workload determined, a few people always seem to do the bulk of the work. Adding insult to injury, a single grade is then awarded to the entire group. I couldn't understand how that is fair.

As a young man who actually cared about grades, I recall developing an unhealthy need to pull my weight, but there were always slackers who couldn't care less. Group projects often left me exhausted, frustrated, and resentful. I think that is one of the reasons why I went into commodity trading at the Montreal Exchange, as an independent trader. I did not have to rely on a group, I did not have to answer to a boss, nor did I have to count on unreliable colleagues. I was on my own, I did it my own way.

But ministry is different, in ministry, one is never alone. So much of what we do in ministry is the coming together of groups of people. Nevertheless, no matter where a group is created or how a group is organized, or for what purpose, one thing remains constant that a few people still do the bulk of the work. Even Jesus had to acknowledge the imbalance of such a labour pool, as in Matthew 9:37, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few."

I am thankful to God for placing Daisy along side of me in marriage and in ministry. Here is someone who works harder than me, who not only could pull her weight, could actually put me to shame with her work ethics. I still recall that shortly after our marriage, we were put into work in youth ministry, running a fellowship for a group of 11 to 13 year-olds. Prior to a fellowship meeting, Daisy and I would discuss and debate the finer points of the Scriptural stories; and after a fellowship, we would debrief and analyze how we could do better the next time. And let me assure you, some of those discussions were quite heated as both of us were strong

headed, and we demanded near perfection of ourselves and of each other. It was a fun time, and for a time it worked.

I can't say the same thing about pastoral ministry. In my first charge as an ordained minister, which happened to be my home church, the church where I grew up, I fumbled quite badly. Now that I have a bit of distance to that ministry, I am able to self reflect a bit more theologically. I think what really went wrong was that I wasn't able to acknowledge the spiritual gifts of others, particularly those elders serving on the Session. I had treated them collectively, like an erroneous authority that needed to be corrected; and they had treated me like a wayward youth that needed to be rebuked, put in his place. Not a healthy dynamic, and certainly not a healthy relationship.

I failed to acknowledge, as the Apostle Paul graciously taught the Corinthians in our lectionary reading today, "*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*" (1 Corinthians 12:4-6)

The Christian congregation gathered in Corinth is often lifted up as a prime example of the incredible diversity that could be found in the early church. Worshipping together were Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, men and women, rich and poor, united by their shared confession that "Jesus is Lord".

The congregation was incredibly gifted, with many spiritual gifts such as the utterance of wisdom, the utterance of knowledge, the gift of faith, the gifts of healing, the power of doing good deeds, prophecy, discernment of spirit, speaking in tongues, and interpretation of tongues.

Yet, the congregation was also incredibly divided. On the issue of leadership, as seen in earlier chapters of this epistle, where some considered Paul their authority, others Apollos, others Peter, and still others accepted only Jesus as their authority. We are not sure if these divisions represented competing house churches, or of multiple factions within a congregation.

Other forms of division also ran rampant amongst the Corinthians, particularly with regard to how important is one form of spiritual gift over another, with speaking in tongues seemingly gaining preference above all other. Thus requiring Paul to devote an entire chapter (1 Corinthians 14) to deal with the abuse of that particular gift. The point that Paul had to make, in no uncertain terms, is that all these gifts and activities are activated by

the same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God, who allots to each one individually as the Spirit chooses.

The key to understand and unlock the true potential of a congregation, whether ancient or post-modern, is the trinitarian formula contained within this declaration, that now forms the preamble of service of ordination for both elders and ministers of the PCC, "*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.*" And here is the most important part: "*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*"

For the common good. In this body of Christ, we are all individual members of it. We are each given gifts, some obvious, some requiring patient nurturing, some lie dormant until timely encouragements from the right people. It does call into question on how we as the congregation value (and devalue) gifts. Who gets invited or nominated to a certain position and certain role in the church, and who does not? How are gifts identified, lifted up, supported and welcomed into service? So together, we are called to be the church with a ministry in the world which is led by the risen Christ.

Lately, I have been hearing more people claiming they are spiritual but not religious. I think what they means is that they do believe in God, and they do seek to live a good and spiritual life, but they have no patience for the Church, and certainly would not participate in any organized worship. I kind of get it. The Church has done some pretty awful stuff in the past, that has turned off many people who were once faithful. But might I suggest those who think they can be spiritual but not religious are in fact misguided.

The Church was never meant to be 'holier than thou' or 'purer than the rest'. The Church has been and will always be a band of saints and sinners, all under the grace of God. The Way of Christ is never meant to be practiced like a religion of spiritual lone rangers, each pursuing their own definition of spiritual ecstasy. The Spirit of God bestowed gifts to individuals in order to build up the Church as the body of Christ.

The list of gifts mentioned by Paul is not meant to be exhaustive, the gifts of the Spirit is much more broad based, touching our every day lives. They include teaching, leading by example, helping others, generosity, compassion, evangelism, encouragement, hospitality, preparing coffee and treats, worship, singing and prayer. And all these gifts are intended to be

publicly communicable, publicly shared, and publicly enjoyed, for the common good.

I've been rethinking my own role as a pastor in a congregation. I am inspired by David Steel, a fellow Presbyterian pastor and columnist, who wrote this challenge: "The key to ministry is knowing what not to do and not doing it."

The role of a minister in a contemporary congregation can become impossibly complex: as preacher, teacher, manager, therapist, spiritual guide, CEO, janitorial clean up on the second pew, just to name a few. I've seen super-pastors endeavouring to do it all (including myself in the past), yet hidden unnoticed by others but certainly not by God, is the desired to be needed, to be admired even. The pitfalls of pride, of burnouts are obvious, but less obvious is the potential for disempowering the people of the congregation in the exercise of their own gifts for ministry, gifts given by the Spirit, to be given back in service for the common good.

Knowing what not to do, and not doing it is not laziness, but actually involving careful and prayerful discernment of one's own strength and weakness, and the willingness to nurture the spiritual gifts of others, in complementary fashion to one's own. It is a challenge for not just ministers but for all leaders of church as well.

The more I think of ministry, the more I come to see it as a group project, working cheerfully and dutifully with others, to solve a giant jigsaw puzzle, of 10,000 pieces. As the perimeter is preset, invitation open, the pieces come together, intricate and interconnected, gifts discovered, fitted and utilized, then a glimpse of the kingdom of God emerges, and it is marvellous, all for the common good.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**