

## A Church of the Differently Gifted

Sunday, January 20, 2019

1 Corinthians 12: 1 - 11

The artwork on the cover of our worship guides today is a piece that hangs in my office. It technically belongs to my husband, but since there's no room for it in our house right now, I stole it for my office! It's a family favorite because we are a family that loves to cook and eat together. Technically the piece is a visual representation of the parable of the leaven – a parable we love so much we had it read at our wedding! (You should have seen the preacher's face when we told him *that* is the text we wanted him to preach from). And since that day, eight years and twenty days ago, it's hung in our kitchen. Until now.

Now it's in my office.

Another thing changed about this painting for me this week. I looked at it on Monday as I was beginning to study the scripture for today's service and for the first time, I didn't see *leaven* in the spoon of the chef. And I noticed *another thing*... something was missing... something I'd never noticed lacking before. You know what it is?

A recipe book. There is no recipe book, no smartphone or tablet with Pinterest pulled up. No, this chef seems to be winging it!

Now, winging it is something I'm very familiar with in the kitchen. In my house growing up, the recipes and cookbooks were rarely used - except for decoration. All the best recipes were safely guarded in my mother's head. Before that, they were in my nana's and before that they were in my mama's nana's head. You know how that goes. Of course, if you were to speak with my nana or my mamma, they would tell you that they are certainly not winging it. They've just made the dish so many times, they don't need a recipe. But when you ask them to tell you what's in it, pay attention to their measurements. They sound a little more like "oh, a little salt, a pinch of sugar... sometimes I put a little basil or oregano in it, sometimes I don't... you know, it depends on what I've got in the pantry or what's growing in the garden." If that's the formula you get, you know you're onto a delicious recipe!

So, I look at this woman in the painting and I wonder... is that really leaven?

Another thing happened 8 years and 20 days ago, when Justin and I got married. We learned that our shared love for cooking and eating could – at times – cause conflict. I had pots and pans I loved. He had pots and pans he loved. But both sets of pots and pans would not fit in one tiny kitchen. Obviously his had to go. Happy wife, happy life... right?

In addition to our different preferred kitchen tools, we soon discovered that we had very different kitchen habits. When trying a new recipe, I look at the recipe as I go. Which inevitably means I'll mess something up. I'll get a measurement wrong, I'll fail to see that I'm supposed to mix dry ingredients first... there's always something. But not Justin. He reads the recipe all the way through. He painstakingly measures each ingredient with an eye for detail even an engineer would respect. He's the first person I've ever seen weigh raw beef to make sure every burger is the same size. Exactly the same size.

They say that opposites attract and for us... at least in the kitchen... this proves to be true.

What I've learned over time is that Justin's way in the kitchen often produces better outcomes than mine.

Recently Mia has been trying her own thing in the kitchen. She, too, shares our love for cooking and eating good food. But her method is one all her own. She is the queen of the "secret recipe". We've tried to tame this by gifting her with kids cookbooks and her own set of R2-D2 measuring cups. But she's pretty stubborn about this. If she is in the kitchen, she wants to be making her secret recipe. The secret recipes are often some blend of flour, sugar, egg... and then sometimes tomato, sometimes zucchini... and they always include three key ingredients: vanilla, cinnamon, and food coloring.

Yum, right?

Most of the time the, um, "food" is baked in the oven, sometimes they're more pancake-types and they require a skillet. Every time Mia's excitement grows, every time the ingredients are a little different, and every time there is an expectation that BOTH mommy and daddy have a taste.

Despite the varying outcomes, Mia's excitement around the whole experiment it is usually worth it. Each time we allow Mia to experiment in the kitchen, it forces both Justin and me to open ourselves up to culinary mystery and release our desire to control the outcomes.

So, this week as I have been reading and reflecting on the text from 1 Corinthians chapter 12, I heard something new coming from the words on the page and I saw something different as I looked up at the artwork hanging beside my desk.

Instead of leaven, I saw spiritual gifts. Instead of a recipe, I saw extravagant and unbridled creativity. Instead of a neat and tidy loaf of bread, I saw a variety of outcomes and applications as people employed their gifts in a multiplicity of ways. Look around the perimeter of the art, you might see it too.

The epistle reading for today comes from 1 Corinthians 12. Picking up with this book in Chapter 12 is sort of like trying to catch up on a group email chain that already has 25 “reply-alls.” Paul, the author of this particular response, is writing to the group in Corinth. He’s not in Corinth with them at the time the letter is sent, and since he’s been away, things have started to get a little, well, disjointed. To understand the Corinthians, and their spiritual struggles, we have to understand their context.

Corinth was a city situated at the intersections of Roman, Greek, and Hebraic Culture. It was a metropolitan area and a commercial hub. Corinthians were quite familiar with the hierarchies of both the marketplace and the Roman empire. Two systems: one economic, the other political, with clear ranking systems so one never has to wonder who is most powerful, most popular, and most valuable.

The problem arises, for Paul at least, when these ways of comparing and categorizing people begins to permeate the church. Earlier in the letter, Paul urges the people to be unified, reminding them that the Holy Spirit has called them together, that the Holy Spirit has called them to bear witness to Christ in their city – to live differently, in accordance to God’s way and not the ways of the world around them. But the Corinthians have gotten distracted by some little things and their ministry is suffering because of it.

According to chapter 12, the Corinthians are a gifted people with a lot of potential. From wisdom to knowledge, from faith to healing, from working miracles to prophesying, from discernment of spirits to speaking in tongues to the interpretation of tongues, this is a gifted crowd! Paul makes it very clear – to them and to us – that *all* of these gifts come from the Spirit and are intended for the building up of the church.

But the Corinthians were people and they did what people do. They let their old rhythms of life and understandings of the world cloud their judgment and influence the way they lived life together. Over time, their gifts became means for comparison and competition. Rather than offering themselves freely to God and one another, they worried – Is his gift more important than mine? Is her role more important? I used to matter here, but now it seems like nobody cares what I think... I guess that’s just the way things are now.

Sound familiar?

It is part of our very humanity to belong, to be needed, to have value. This is true for us professionally and socially... and it’s also true in the church. We all want to be seen and recognized for the gifts that we have to offer, this is why it’s easy to understand the conflict in the Corinthian church. We’ve been there too! Some of us may be there now.

When I look at this piece of art, my focus goes to the woman in the middle, working on her recipe. I have no idea what the plan is, but I believe she’s mixing up something great.

Then I look around at the margins of the main image; and I begin to see the gifts of the Spirit rippling out into the world. A priest giving bread to a parishioner, people walking with loaves in hand out into their city, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, playing music on the corner... each one offering the gift that she has to the world.

There is a circular motion to the work on the margins that reminds me of the Corinthian text – especially Paul’s emphasis on the gifts coming from God and being used to build up the kingdom of God.

It makes me think about this church, you, its members, and your different gifts. If we were to be recipients of a similar letter, perhaps it would read like this:

Now about your spiritual gifts, good people of Greystone Baptist, I do not want you to be misinformed. You know that when you lived like the world you were tempted by the idols of wealth and power, those things that the world offers to you in exchange for your gifts. It’s easy to get caught up in all that stuff, but let me remind you that God has given you these gifts to benefit God’s work in the world.

So now I want to remind you that there are many different gifts, but the same Spirit; there are many different kinds of service but the same Lord; there varieties of activities but the same God who calls us into action. Each one of you receives your gifts from the Spirit and for the good of the community.

To one is given wisdom, to another knowledge, to another faith, another healing... to one is given music, to another compassion, to one prayer, to one a desire for justice... all of these (and so much more) have been given to you by the Spirit of God, and all of these are intended for God’s purpose in the world.

The hard part is that we don’t always know or understand God’s vision. Most of us grown-ups are like me and Justin in the kitchen. Following a recipe, trying to measure out one cup of hard work, two tablespoons of luck, one pinch of faith, and a gallon of strategy. We have fallen prey to the myth that our lives are as formulaic and predictable as any good recipe. All we have to do is get it right and all will be well (the way we understand “well”).

But I wonder if God works a little more like our daughter. Bursting into the kitchen with joy and energy, bored with the recipe book before it’s even open and ready to create anew – one secret recipe at a time?

And if this is how God works, we probably need to get more comfortable with outcomes that are unknown to us. Because secret recipes are always unpredictable – at least to us.

Looking at the artwork again, I also realize that I’m not the one doing the mixing. I’m in the spoon. I’m one small granule of spice with one tiny set of gifts given to me so that

they might be used by the master chef. For the time being, maybe all of us are granules in that spoon, waiting to be mixed together, each with our different gifts... each a necessary, unique, and irreplaceable ingredient in God's own secret recipe.

As we wait to see what the master is creating, the calling remains for us just as it did for the people in ancient Corinth. We must remember and hold fast to the truth that all of us are God's own beloved, uniquely created, and differently gifted with exactly the right things that are needed to empower the church of Christ.

While we are waiting to see what might unfold, the call remains, just as it did for the people in Corinth. We've got to begin to recognize our gifts and vulnerably offer them to God, releasing our control over the outcomes and letting ourselves find peace in knowing that God is the master chef. Calling up a little bit of this, a little bit of that, mixing it together and offering it to the world as the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

## **Reflection and Response**

Today during the song of reflection, I will be here for anyone who is feeling led to come forward. Is God leading you to join the church or give your life to Christ? Or maybe there's a prayer concern you'd like to share, if God is leading, come and meet me down front.

As we continue our time of reflection and response, you are invited to think about what your gifts may be. Maybe God has given you the gift of music, maybe you're a teacher, maybe you are discerning, or maybe you can create beautiful works of art. Maybe you're a listener or maybe you bring comfort to those around you. Maybe you have a heart for those who are hurting or maybe you have the gift of hospitality. Or maybe you have a different gift, something not yet named in this space.

If you know what your gifts are – some of them, any of them – write them down on one side of your paper. Leave the other side blank.

If you do not know what your gifts are or how God might be asking you to contribute, to participate in this church of the differently gifted, write a prayer on one side of the page. Ask God to show you what your gifts are so that you can use them for the building up of God's kingdom here, who knows...

you never know what God might be cooking up right here.