

**Sermon for January 17, 2016 (Epiphany 2, Year C)**  
**Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:1-13; Psalm 36:5-10; John 2:1-11

Know what: the Spirit gives gifts to each one

So what: discern and know your gifts

Now what: become what you are

Title:

At the corner of Fourth and Walnut in the downtown district of Louisville, Kentucky, Thomas Merton stood and looked around him. It was March of 1958.

Merton was a monk who lived in a strict monastery in rural Kentucky where silence was observed every single day. The monks did not talk. They used a special sign language to communicate with one another.

And yet, here he stood in the afternoon sunshine of a busy and noisy city day. He had come into the city to run some errands for the monastery, but as he stood on that street corner, the Holy Spirit touched him and he was overcome by a profound and unexpected experience.

Merton looked at all of the people walking busily around those city streets and he was suddenly overwhelmed by the realization that he loved all of those people, that he belonged to them and they belonged to him – that they were all united together in the very structure of reality – even though they were total strangers.

Later, Merton wrote about this in his journal and explained that this sudden awareness “was like waking from a dream of separateness” (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Image Books, 1965: p.153-154).

Like waking from a dream of separateness.

When the apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the young Church in the busy city of Corinth, he wanted to remind them of the deep realities into which they had been brought by virtue of their faith and baptism.

“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

It seems that there was division and strife among the disciples in Corinth, because of the different gifts that they had received.

“Charisma” is the Greek word for spiritual gifts.

And although these “charisma” were divine gifts given freely by God, it seems that some had resorted to old patterns of ranking one another based upon the perceived important of each gift.

Obviously, if you have a more important gift from God, then that means that God values you more highly than another with a less important gift.

This is how the natural mind thinks, but these are not the thoughts of God.

To correct this error, Paul introduces here for the very first time the analogy of the Body to explain that diversity within the Church is God’s desire and plan.

It is not something to be feared or rejected.

Unity does not require uniformity.

“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

My friends: today I ask you to consider that what Paul proposed as a new way of understanding the Church in his time also speaks profoundly about right now about the crisis affecting humanity.

What does it mean for you and me to be given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good?

In his remarkable encyclical published last year, Pope Francis issued a call to all humanity to live in the awareness of “a new and universal solidarity” (paragraph 14).

You see, just as Saint Paul explained that “all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12). And so it is with humanity.

Each era of history has its own challenges, and in this day and this era, “we need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family” (Laudato Si, paragraph 52).

As Pope Francis joyfully explained, “everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage” (Paragraph 92).

Now we shouldn’t be naïve and expect that this is easy.

No, it is extremely difficult for people to think this way.

It was difficult for the church in Corinth.

Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, male and female – all were baptized into the one body. The truth is that their old divisions were gone – wiped out completely by the Holy Spirit!

What is it that Paul wrote? “We were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

This is a statement of fact: you are one body of Christ.

It is done. Complete. Finished. Neither then nor now do the baptized ever have to work on becoming the Body of Christ!

We are. What is needed is for us to become what we are.

When Thomas Merton stood on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, it took the movement of the Holy Spirit to open the eyes of his heart to SEE reality all around him.

This vision of human solidarity is just as much a gift of the Holy Spirit as wisdom and faith and tongues.

“We need a new and universal solidarity.”

The ability to SEE in this way is also a charisma, a gift of the Spirit – given for the common good.

How can we know this is a spiritual gift? Because it is not natural. It is supernatural. The natural way, our basic biological instinct, is to draw the circle close, to favor those who carry our genetic information and to stay close to those who can protect our progeny. These are the ones who look and act like us.

To move beyond this basic instinct requires a different way of seeing.

I believe that this large view of humanity is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Over the last few weeks, the world has learned about some of the cities and towns within Syria where the citizens are being starved to death.

Innocent elders and women and children who are unable to fight or to flee are surrounded and kept without supplies of food by both government forces and the opposition. They are used and killed as pawns in a sick game by desperate and angry men.

It is estimated that perhaps 450,000 people are now suffering from malnutrition and at risk of starvation. Some of these cities have had all of their electricity cut off and water supplies are extremely limited.

In case you do not know, it can be quite cold in Syria in the winter.

It is impossible for me to imagine the misery of those hundreds of thousands who are cut off and surrounded by vicious killers, starving, cold, with no hope on the horizon.

The old, natural mind would say that those people are of no concern to me.

But the mind of the Spirit says something very different.

The Holy Spirit tells me that they are not strangers to me, that I share with them the fate of our common humanity.

That I cannot – and must not – continue with my daily routines as if their lives have no meaning.

This is not about guilt. Please understand. Guilt is a worthless emotion. It has no lasting power for good.

This is about waking from a dream of separateness, just like Merton did on that street corner.

It is about seeing with new eyes, like those with which Paul called his friends in Corinth to see.

It is about awareness.

Just consider: when one part of your physical body is sick or injured, the first step toward active healing is awareness that there is a problem.

You must be aware of the problem and then take the necessary steps to pursue healing.

My friends: the Holy Spirit is at work within us to open our hearts and minds to a larger and deeper reality, to enable us to see this earth from God's perspective.

When we gather in a few minutes for the Great Thanksgiving, after we pray the Lord's Prayer together, we will come to the part of the liturgy called "the Fraction". I will take the large host, break it in half and hold it up for all to see.

Then I will invite you to see something far larger and deeper with Holy Spirit-inspired awareness as I say, Behold what you are.

And together, if you are willing, you'll reply and say:

***May we become what we receive.***

Let's practice that once real quick so that when we come to that point and the words are a bit different, then we are prepared and ready.

*Presider:* Behold what you are!

*People:* ***May we become what we receive.***

May we become what we receive.

The Body of Christ, broken and shared so that others may live.

The Blood of Christ, poured out for the redemption of the world.

This is reality. This is who we are, who the Holy Spirit has called and created us to be.

All that we need to do now is to wake up from our dream of separateness and become what we already are.

"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

Will you embrace those gifts which the Holy Spirit has given already you, and will you put them to work for the common good, for the good of the entire human family? May it be so. Amen.