

"Variety—The Spice of Life" A sermon based on Isaiah 62:1-5, 1 Corinthians 12:1-13 and John 2:1-11 delivered on January 19, 2025 at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young.

The proverbial saying, "variety is the spice of life," comes to mind as we read our passage from Corinthians this morning. In the New Revised Standard version, the word used is "variety" for the different kinds of gifts. The fact is that we need variety. I was reminded of this fact as we changed the paraments from white to gold this week. The liturgical calendar says that they can stay white for a few more weeks, with the option of changing to green, so I chose gold—which is what we use in place of green during parts of the year. The green or gold signifies "ordinary" time in the church year. I felt it was time to go back to the "ordinary" as a relief from the "extraordinary" time that we have just experienced through Advent and Christmas.

Right after the Christmas decorations, the wreaths, the memorial tree, the nativity scene, the poinsettias, the advent lanterns, all the extra glitter, have been taken down in the sanctuary—it feels a bit sad—a bit exposed—a bit naked. But, now I think it is a kind of relief to go back to the simplicity of what we call "ordinary"—the plain beauty of our tall clear glass windows that let in the much needed winter sun and our well-appointed, yet simple, chancel and simple stained glass. It is somehow calming to go back to the gold paraments, which signify "ordinary" time—gold or green, the liturgical colors which symbolizes a time of quiet growth—which will eventually give way to "extraordinary" time again through Lent and Easter. We need this ordinary time—for variety and to rest, to catch our breath, and to meditate on what it means to have Christ re-born in the world again, before we begin the dizzying and paralyzing remembrance of his crucifixion and resurrection.

“⁴ There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. ⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”

For the "common good" the scriptures remind us—not all gifts—not all charisma, in Greek, are the same. Some gifts are rather ordinary, this passage tells us. They are not all extraordinary gifts, not all glitzy, like speaking in tongues or the working of miracles, as Jesus did in our John passage this morning at the Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11)—turning water into wine; or like God spoke about in our Isaiah reading, turning a peoples from “Deserted and Desolate” to one in which they were “Married to God” and became “God’s delight.” No, we may not be able to turn our entire community of people from desolate to a delight, but we do have some less spectacular gifts: like the utterance of quiet words of wisdom or knowledge, or to comfort someone who is hurting. Or it might be a gift as ordinary as the quiet of discernment of spirits. These gifts are given to each in his or her own way and are meant to further the "common good." Like the variety of colors of the paraments throughout the church year, each one has a different feel—leaves us feeling a different way—but they all are good in their season.

The Greek word for variety in this passage really means "different," as it is correctly translated in our pew bibles. Different does not mean better or worse—it just means different—different in order to provide for all the gifts necessary to assure that the common good will be served.

I had a wonderful experience some years ago. I spent the whole afternoon at the local "Y" attending a Gymnastics meet where some of my church kids were participating. There were sixty young people there. They were kids of all ages, body types, shapes and sizes. Some were so petite you wondered why the wind

didn't blow them over. Others were full bodied and strong looking. Some even might have been considered a little "chunky," but each of them competed with joy and confidence and through the gift of true grace. No matter how well they did, no one came off the beam, bars, vault or mat in distress. Some were better at one event than another, but they all cheerfully competed at each event and cheered each other on. The coaches and mentors were fantastic. They encouraged each participant, helped when it was needed for one of the kids to do a particular move, and generally encouraged the giftedness of each child. What an example this was of the truth of the apostle Paul's words to the Corinthians! Here were all these differently talented kids, participating in a variety of events, and just enjoying themselves immensely and receiving quality adult mentoring. It was a shining moment for me to be there and to observe it! I had a similar experience when I was asked to sing the National Anthem at the opening of a Winter Special Olympics event. Each contestant, differently abled, was cheered on and encouraged no matter what their skill level or where they finished in the event. Whenever I despair about the future of a world, which currently is reaping the terrible consequences of our human carbon footprint with "natural" disasters and which is participating in a dozen separate wars, I am brought up short by an experience of pure joy like these—where our young people shine.

Not all of us can sing, or dance, or ride a bike, or ski, or bake, or write essays, or use our bodies gracefully, as those young people did at the "Y" and in the ice rink and on the slopes—not all can teach, or fix mechanical things—but whatever unique gifts we are given, we are asked to use them to the best of our abilities through the power of the one Spirit that activates them all.

This is what Paul is reminding his beloved church in Corinth, and what we are being reminded of almost 2000 years later in this beloved faith community. We

are being reminded that we are all equal in God's eyes, no matter what our gifts, whether they are labeled by society as "ordinary" or "extraordinary," they are all equal and given for the common good. This is true because, as Paul emphasizes, the same Spirit—the spirit of the living God, gives them all. Further, we are not to be led astray by lusting after gifts that we are not given—by making idols of attributes or abilities that we do not possess. As Paul reminds the church in Corinth and us, too: *“I do not want you to be uninformed. ² You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols.”* (v. 1-2) We are not to make idols of being able to sing arias, teach at prestigious schools, play the piano like the masters, slam dunk a basketball, or get a hole in one. We are just to do the very best that we can with what we have been given.

And finally, the late poet, cartoonist, composer, lyricist and folksinger, Shel Silverstein in his book Where the Sidewalk Ends, through his extraordinary ability to write whimsically truthful poetry for all ages to appreciate, gifts us with a playful reminder of these ancient truths entitled, "Ourchestra:"

So you haven't got a drum, just beat your belly.
 So I haven't got a horn—I'll play my nose.
 So we haven't any cymbals— We'll just slap our hands together.
 And though there may be better orchestras
 That sound a little better
 With their fancy shiny instruments
 That cost an awful lot—
 Hey, we're making music twice as good
 By playing what we've got!

Amen and Amen.