

The Work of One through Everyone

2nd Sun. after Epiphany – 01/16/22 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 6-7, “...there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

Introduction

✘ On December 12, 1980, a small startup company called Apple became a public corporation and offered its first shares of stock. In the business world, this is referred to as an “initial public offering” and it requires that a lot of documentation be filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission to protect the interests of all those investing in the new company.

→ One of those documents is a full disclosure of any foreseeable weaknesses or problems. This is what Steve Jobs, one of the founders of Apple, disclosed as a “foreseeable weakness” for the new company. (Keep in mind this was over 40 years ago.) “The expansion of the personal computer market will require a continued orientation effort directed at informing individuals of the means by which the computer may be utilized to enhance personal efficiency and productivity. Towards this end, the Company is committed to an extensive advertising and promotional effort” (Apple Computer IPO, US Securities and Exchange Commission, Public Domain, December 1980).

→ Allow me to simplify the statement: The founders of Apple Computer, at that time were concerned that no one would have any use for their product! Back then, personal computers were a novelty. It would take many years before the world would realize their full potential and make them an integral part of our human existence. It’s hard for us today to think that there was a time when our society had to be convinced that computers might be useful now that most of us would feel helpless without one.

✘ Our Epistle Reading today begins by saying, “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed” (v. 1). Though we Christians frequently hear about the third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, we may actually wonder, “What does He really do? What does He help us achieve?” Well this is one of the many texts in Scripture where Paul teaches us how the Holy Spirit is the one who empowers the Christian Church; how without Him you and I are truly helpless!

I. The Spirit works in ways we may not see as “spiritual”

✘ At the risk of bursting some bubbles, I need to share that technically speaking 1 Cor. 12:1 does not literally speak of spiritual “gifts”. The Greek word used is πνευματικῶν (pneumatikon) that literally means “things of the spirit” – that is ways that the Spirit works in a Christian’s everyday life.

→ That seems to indicate that Paul’s focus here is less on the individual Christian and more on the Holy Spirit. He’s teaching the Christians in Corinth (and us) how amazingly useful the Holy Spirit is to us all now that we’ve received Him in our baptism.

✘ Verses 4–6 give us a fairly broad description of the Holy Spirit’s gifts, services, and activities. Not only do they all come from the Spirit, but as such they obviously are all God’s work; miraculously accomplished using fragile human hands and imperfect human speech. Paul says, “it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone” (v.6).

→ We must never forget that our day to day acts of loving and serving our neighbor; our utterances of wisdom or knowledge; any of our human actions of healing body or mind, or translating a foreign language are all God’s work through His Spirit. Whether it seems astonishing or mundane, God is doing it.

- ✘ Martin Luther shows us that this is our primary Christian vocation. In his commentary on Genesis he says, “We all have one and the same God, and we are one in the unified worship of God, even if our works and vocations are different. But each one should do his duty in his station, even as Jacob is a saintly and spiritual man meditating on God’s Law, praying, administering and governing the church. In the meantime, however, he does not overlook lowly domestic duties connected with the fields and the flocks, and this is set before us as an example that we may know that all our actions in domestic life are pleasing to God and that they are necessary for this life in which it becomes each one to serve the one God and Lord of all according to one’s ability and vocation” (AE 6:348).
 - ➔ So theologically we say that our “vocation” is the everyday services, activities, and words that we Christians express in our daily interaction with our neighbors. God gives these to us as gifts. 1 Peter 4:10-11 says, “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies – in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ”.
 - ➔ Sometimes our vocations might seem very “spiritual” to our human way of looking at things, such as evangelism, church work, or caring for the poor. But other times our vocational tasks might seem a far stretch from the spiritual, such as the person repairing our car, the attorney in the courtroom, the parents getting completely exasperated with their teenager for not ending video games when it’s 10 p.m. on a school night or when they’re changing a diaper at 3 a.m..
- ✘ The truth is, the Holy Spirit is constantly at work through all human actions and words, however mundane or majestic they may seem to our eyes. All services, words, and activities, as long as they do not violate the Word of God, are part of the Holy Spirit’s work with the ultimate goal, as verse three says, that we are proclaiming toward our neighbor, “Jesus is Lord” (v.3).

II. The Spirit’s work is not individual but corporate

- ✘ Unfortunately though, Satan likes to deceive the human heart whenever possible, doesn’t he? So he takes advantage of every opportunity to focus our hearts and minds on the spirit of “me” rather than the Spirit of God. This is why Paul teaches us here what true “spiritual things” look like as opposed to our empty, human effort.
 - ➔ Multiple places in our text Paul shows that the Spirit works not to gift or empower me for my benefit or glory but for those with whom I have a relationship. This has been a common struggle in recent church history, with congregations emphasizing that a Christian’s identity or purpose is determined by figuring out his/her individual “spiritual gifts”. But the Spirit works in you and me first and foremost Paul says “for the common good” (v.7).
- ✘ Paul protects us from the temptation of thinking that I am any greater or more god-like than any other believer in this text. Each time that I say “there are varieties of service” (v.5) “given” “to each” Christian (v.7) “individually” (v.11), Paul is clear to proclaim that those things come from and work by “the same Lord” (v.5) or “Spirit for the common good” (v.7) “as He wills” (v.11).
 - ➔ This focus on the corporate or relational nature of God’s work and God’s church reflects of course on the way that Scripture refers to the distinctly three, but fully one, relational nature of God in the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God’s relational emphasis goes all the way back to Creation. Remember, the first human being was incomplete as long as he was alone. But God created us in and for relationship with Him and one another, first from the dust and, later, as new creations through Baptism, where He brings us together in the Body of His Church. Romans 12:4-5 says, “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all

have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another".

- ✘ This is the great Epiphany; the “ah-hah” for us all today; that the day-to-day work of the Holy Spirit through your human hands is not an individual effort; neither is your place here in Christ’s Church firstly focused upon the things that you individually get out of being here. Instead it is each one of us playing one part of a much greater whole. God brought you into His church for my benefit and His glory, just as He brought me into His church for your benefit and His glory. And when the light bulb goes on inside of us and we realize that truth, it’s then that you and I realize and enjoy and are fulfilled to overflowing with the “spiritual things” that God has for us all. But it’s when we reduce the work of the Holy Spirit to the individual alone that we are destined for disappointment.
- ✘ Consider this example of a Christian in whom the Spirit regularly worked to bring care and compassion to others. We’ll call her Sally. Sally and her 20-something son, Tyler were out shopping for some athletic shoes for Tyler. They were having trouble finding a pair that would satisfy Tyler. But as they drove to the next store, Sally suddenly turned in to the local Thrift Store. Tyler exclaimed, “This is a waste of time, there is no way I’ll want anything from this kind of store”. Sally persisted though and endured Tyler’s rebukes as she started digging through a table of VHS tapes. “Why are you wasting your time with those ancient things Mom”, he said. “No one has that tech anymore. Now It’s all about streaming movies and games and shows.”
 - ➔ Finally she found what she wanted, a VHS tape of professional hockey playoff highlights. Tyler was even more belligerent because he knew Sally didn’t even like hockey. Once they were back in the car, Sally said, “We need to make a quick stop down the street here, at Gene Thompson’s house”, one of the elderly members of their church who was unable to get out of the house anymore. Sally forced Tyler to come in with her so that he could witness the absolute euphoria that Mr. Thompson displayed when Sally placed the tape in his old VHS player and played it. It was the only kind of technology that he owned. You see, Gene once played hockey and his walls displayed banners of his favorite hockey team.
 - ➔ Tyler had to admit that he would have never considered doing such a thing for someone else, yet he marveled at his Mom’s compassion and the joy she (and he) received in sharing with Mr. Thompson what most of the world today thinks of as garbage. This showed the Spirit’s work through Sally and taught Tyler of His power; working and caring for the whole through the individual.

III. The Spirit Provides the Power

- ✘ So, Paul teaches us here this morning that you and I play the part, but it’s the Holy Spirit who provides all of the power. Verses 6 & 11, “It is the same God who empowers them all in everyone,” and “all these are empowered by one and the same Spirit”.
 - ➔ It’s true that your services, your activities, your words are “yours”, but we must never forget that the power that ultimately drives and accomplishes things is fully the Lord’s. Verse three tells us that even our ability to believe and proclaim “Jesus is Lord” is the work of the Holy Spirit, as He alone creates faith.
- ✘ Verse two distinguishes though each believer’s life before faith when they were led to serve dead idols with empty outcomes. Paul says, “...however you were led”; that is, by something or someone other than the Holy Spirit. So, whether it is desire, anger, envy, or some other emotional drive – our human power only produces dead work. Spiritual work can only be Spiritually powered.

- For you parents among us, answer this, “Why do you (or did you) provide care for your children?” Because it’s the law? Is that the reason you feed your family? Is that why you overspent your budget during Christmas? Is that why you couldn’t sleep every time you worried about your parenting decisions? I doubt it.
- The power of parenting and every other vocation under the call of Christ comes from something far greater than any earthly emotion or punishment or reward. It is empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is given to us through the faith created by the Word of God combined with the Spirit in the water of our Baptism.
- ⊗ Most important, if your work and mine is truly of the Holy Spirit; powered by Him and not ourselves, then the ultimate outcome comes from the fact that “Jesus is Lord”; meaning He is Creator, Savior, Redeemer, and Sanctifier of your soul. He is your all in all, just as He is for “everyone” as Paul says in verse six.
- He told us in verse one, “I do not want you to be uninformed” about these Spiritual things. Well, now you can say you are informed. Now you know that the Holy Spirit works actively in all of us as believers. Now you know we are all helpless without Him. But with Him; serving together in the Body of Christ, we now see the world as He sees it. We see His marvelous work in us, through us and around us every day – now and for eternity. In the name of Jesus. Amen.