

“For the Common Good”
1 Corinthians 12:1-11
Second Sunday after Epiphany

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Westminster, Greenville
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This past week, I saw a photograph—
I don’t recall if it was in the newspaper,
or in *Time* magazine, or where it was,
but I saw a photograph of a government worker,
someone unable to go to work during the government shutdown,
and she was protesting the shutdown.

She was holding up a sign that read: “I work for the common good.”

It caught my attention, that sign.
I wonder if there are four more elusive,
four more challenging words
for us as Christians these days:

What four words am I referring to?
“...for the common good.”

Never mind the government shutdown.

Just consider what it takes to be a faithful Christian and a faithful church in a country that is increasingly more and more polarized.

The pastor of White Memorial Presbyterian Church in Raleigh, North Carolina is Christopher Edmonston. I don’t know him, but a year ago this month, he wrote an article that really stuck in my memory.

The article began like this:

“The steaming mad email arrived Sunday afternoon. The subject line read: ‘Leaving White Memorial.’ The writer, a member whom I had known well, accused me of holding a political town rally, of bringing politics into the church...”

What had Edmonston done?
He writes:

“I had invited the governor of North Carolina, who was a Democrat, and a ruling elder and a member in our church for more than 20 years, to speak on...the growing opioid epidemic in North Carolina.

No press was present.

He spoke during the education hour.

The governor was, to be fair, not even political.

He shared that he was serving on President Trump’s opioid task force and valued the health of our people over deep political divisions. While I got a few emails of praise, I still got the one noting ‘Leaving White Memorial.’ I have not seen its writer in the 10 weeks since.

Edmonston continues:

“Such is the nature of our times and of our ministry... We are a purple church in a purple state whose rural areas are increasingly red and whose urban areas are increasingly blue....

Everything is changing here.

My son’s large urban high school was founded in 1929 for white students only. In 2017, the student body looks like the United Nations and there are more than 30 native languages spoken by the student body.”

“[The] purple haze has an effect on everything we do, plan and offer as ministry for members and visitors...”¹

Frankly, I was moved by Edmonston’s honesty about his struggle and his church’s struggle to answer the question:

***How does one stay faithful to the gospel
when one is part of a PURPLE church?***

Of course, that’s not just a question for White Memorial.

¹ “Pastoring a Purple Church,” by Christopher Edmonston, in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, January 2, 2018.

It's a question for us, right here at Westminster.

So let me share with you one of the things that first ATTRACTED me to this congregation. It was something that the Pastor Nominating Committee said to me, in the very first conversation I had with them.

If memory serves, they asked me to describe the congregation that I was serving in Dallas, and one of the words I used for that congregation was PURPLE.

People with different political viewpoints, people with a variety of theological viewpoints... worshipping together, discussing and debating in adult education classes together, going on mission trips together.

All committed to a higher calling, and that was to be THE BODY OF CHRIST together.

And the PNC chuckled and said, "Ben, we think you just described Westminster too."

In other words, it's not just my passion for the Minnesota Vikings that leads me to the color purple. I very much feel called to serve a purple congregation too! A place where we won't practice our faith in echo chambers...

But that doesn't answer the question:

When you're a part of a purple church, what exactly is "the common good"?

I raise these questions because that phrase—"for the common good"—it's not just our sermon title. It appears in our text for today, in words written by the Apostle Paul, almost 2000 years ago.

A bit of context would be helpful, perhaps.

In this 12th chapter, Paul is writing to the Corinthians about gifts.

Paul had founded this church. And then he left, to start other churches.

But he knows this congregation.

He knows that the Corinthians are a very GIFTED congregation.

But he receives word, while he is away, that they had also become a DIVIDED congregation.

They were fighting with one another...factions had arisen.
As Paul writes in the very first chapter:

“...it has been reported to me...that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.”

And one of those quarrels has to do with gifts.

Some in the congregation have the gift of speaking in tongues, and they consider this to be a superior gift, a gift that they believe makes them BETTER than other members of their church.

So in our text for today, Paul explains—very gently—why one gift is not superior to another gift:

“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 Paul goes on to list all these different types of spiritual gifts that exist in that church. All of which would be fine and good, if Paul had quit right there.

If Paul had just said, everyone has a gift, respect the gift that everyone else has...great. No problem.

But in verse 7, Paul writes:

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

And that’s when things get...complex.

It means we cannot simply use the gifts that God has given us—
for our own good,
or for our family’s good.

We must use our gifts for the common good.

We must use them for the common good here in our community.

We must use them for the common good in our country.

And we must use them for the common good here in our church.

Now...how in the world are we going to do that?

You see, one of the gifts that I've noticed in the five months that I've been with all of you is the way you THINK.

This is a SMART congregation.

An intelligent congregation.

A place that's full of people who are wiser than me, and have many life experiences that I have never had.

So...how do we use that gift of intelligence and wisdom, and combine it with our faith in a PURPLE church?

Does it mean we ignore the "hot-button" issues that are out there?

Issues like the #MeToo movement, or immigration, or racism...is the most faithful use of our gifts to keep those topics OUT OF church?

Is it to talk about those topics in church, but only with people we're sure already agree with us, so no conflicts take place?

Or is it perhaps, just perhaps...to figure out a way to discuss those topics...the very issues that polarize our society...to talk about them not all the time, but some of the time, and to do it in a Christian way, respecting and loving our neighbor who believes something different, right here in this church?

On this holiday weekend, I'm reminded of something Martin Luther King, Jr. once said in a speech at Dartmouth, over 55 years ago:

"Men often hate each other because they fear each other, and they fear each other because they don't know each other. They don't know each other because they can't communicate with each other, and they can't communicate with each other because they are separated from each other.

"And I think one of the great tragedies of life is that more often men seek to live in monologue rather than dialogue...."²

² From "Towards Freedom," transcript of a speech given by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at Dartmouth College, May 23, 1962, at www.dartmouth.edu. This speech can easily be found through a Google search. The bolded line is my emphasis.

Do you think that we, who are part of this very gifted congregation, can strive for that kind of dialogue?

What does it take for a church community like ours to be a SAFE PLACE for the kind of conversations that King was referring to?

What if “the common good” begins with getting to know people in our church or in our community whom we don’t know very well right now?

It reminds me of a book I read not too long ago.

The book is called *In the Neighborhood: The Search for Community on an American Street, One Sleepover at a Time*.

The author, Peter Lovenheim, describes his suburban, New York City neighborhood.

Large lots. Nice homes.
But all was not so nice behind every home.

One night on this comfortable block, a mother of two was shot and killed. Not by a burglar, but by her husband. He took her life, and then his own.

When news of this disaster got around, Peter Lovenheim realized that he knew that family not at all. They practically lived next door...and he had no idea who they were!

Turns out they were two successful doctors. They went jogging together, did the occasional car pool for neighborhood kids...everything looked good ON THE OUTSIDE. But inside the house, the marriage was ending, and the husband was emotionally unstable.

During that awful night, the wife had a feeling that her husband was **NOT** in good shape. So she called a friend who lived 20 minutes away, leaving message after message to see if she could spend the night. The friend was unreachable by phone, so the woman went home, and disaster struck.

Now it was plain bad luck that the friend wasn't home.
But Lovenheim was disturbed by something else.
Why hadn't the woman reached out to a neighbor?
Why weren't her neighbors her friends?
Why not knock on a neighbor's door and say, "I don't feel safe... may I come in?"

Or more to the point...if Lovenheim had ever bothered to get to know that doctor and her family, isn't there a chance she would've knocked on HIS door?

The whole thing troubled him enough to set out on a mission: to get to know his neighbors.

How did he do this?
That's the kicker.

He went up to his unknown neighbors, and he asked if he could spend the night.

That's right.
Approached people who had no idea who HE was, on his very own block...and he asked if he could sleep over on the couch.

Now what would YOU say if someone on your block whom you didn't know called you out of the blue, and said, "May I sleep on your sofa?"

Of course some neighbors turned him down.
But more than half said sure.
And what happened then?

Well...

Something simple.
He got to know people on his own block that he didn't know before.

And he found human suffering that was literally right down the street.

- Behind one door was a real estate agent who was considering leaving her husband.
- Behind another door was a single mother who was bravely battling cancer.
- Behind a third door was a lonely retired doctor.

And after a bit of time, and after a number of sleepovers, something fascinating happened. “The fabric of the neighborhood” changed, as one person put it.³ For example, that lonely retired doctor? He ended up caring for the single mother with cancer, driving her places when she could not drive herself.

Not everyone became friends, but because of Lovenheim’s effort to get to know his neighbors, the COMMON GOOD had dramatically improved.

Now don’t misunderstand.

I’m not suggesting that each of you start walking up to different neighbors’ houses this afternoon asking if you can sleep over.

What I am suggesting is that the SILOS that exist out there—
 silos of political affiliation, or silos of wealth,
 or whatever silo tries to trap us into speaking and living
 in our own personal echo chamber...
 those silos can also find their way IN HERE.

And living in silos...that’s not what the Christian faith teaches.
 Living in community, loving and knowing your neighbor no matter their
 differences...that’s what our faith teaches.

For Christians, getting to know people who are different than us is NOT an optional part of our faith.

³ Peter Lovenheim, *In the Neighborhood: The Search for Community on an American Street, One Sleepover at a Time*, New York: Perigee, 2010. This summary of the book, while not a duplicate quote, is greatly indebted to Lillian Daniel’s review of the book, “Suburban Search for Meaning,” in *The Christian Century*, July 27, 2011.

It's a requirement—whether they're of another race, or another income level, or another line of work.

That's who we're called to be.

Two thoughts come to mind.

Number one...I've been having lunches with Session members over the past couple months. Asking them what their thoughts and ideas and vision is for our future here together at Westminster.

Wonderful conversations.

And, to be frank, pretty easy and enjoyable conversations to have.

So when I read Paul's words to the church in Corinth this week, an idea—a hope came to me. One of my hopes for the years to come is that we will also, as a church community, be willing not just to have the easy conversations, but to have the hard conversations together.

Conversations about the issues that are polarizing our society right now.

Conversations about the so-called “hot topics” in which monologue is always easier than dialogue.

I hope we won't avoid those discussions in church.

Second thought...stay with me on this.

Years ago, I was on an airplane, headed to Montana. We were sitting on the tarmac, getting ready to leave the gate, when this very LARGE human being walked onto the plane and sat down in the seat right in front of me.

I say seat. He sat in the SEATS in front of me.

He had to move the hand rest up, and use two seats—in order to fit.

After the plane took off, the airline attendant brought him some coffee. It was in one of those small, paper cups. And his hand DWARFED the cup. You could tell the cup was hard for him to hold, because his hand was so big.

Who was this ENORMOUS stranger?
 Finally, I got a look at his face...and I knew who it was.
 Andre the Giant.

Do any of you remember Andre the Giant?
 He was a professional wrestler. He was an actor even, was in that wonderful
 movie *The Princess Bride*.

Andre the Giant stood 7'4", weighed almost 500 pounds.
 I wanted to shake his hand, just to say I shook hands with Andre the Giant.
 I wanted to strike up a conversation with him.

But then I thought...ah, he probably gets that all the time.
 What if he doesn't like it?
 What if he got annoyed?

Andre the Giant isn't exactly someone you want on your bad side.
 Should I do it? Should I not do it?
 Back and forth I went, the entire plane ride...

I never did it.
 I chickened out.
 I never greeted Andre the Giant.

Why do I bring that up?

I bring it up because I'm pretty sure God does not care one whit that I failed
 to talk to Andre the Giant that day on the airplane long ago.

But I'm completely certain that God does care whether I talk to you,
 and whether I listen to you,
 not just about the easy stuff, but about the hard stuff,
 the stuff that makes this church purple.

And God cares whether you talk to one another,
 and whether we all listen to one another...

Not with a spirit of fear.

Not with a spirit that says, "I'm going to convince everyone here that my side of this issue is right."

I hope we might enter into those conversations with the Holy Spirit.

Trusting in the Holy Spirit to guide us and to lead us and show us how best to use our gifts.

If we did that, we might make some mistakes.

But I believe that in the end, it just might go a long way toward increasing the common good.

Amen.