

“A Living Edifice”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for February 7th 2016 (Transfiguration Sunday)
by Foster Freed

1st Corinthians 14: 1-19

The Spirit...the Holy Spirit...has been much on our minds this past while! Has been much on our minds: to an extent we might not have anticipated in the immediate aftermath of the first of the two great Christian feasts, the one we call Christmas, the one that reaches its culmination with the celebration of the Epiphany! On the contrary! A focus upon the life and work of the Holy Spirit is far more customary in the immediate aftermath of the second of the two great Christian feasts: the one we call Easter, the one that reaches **its** culmination with the celebration of Pentecost: a celebration, after all, which marks the giving of the Spirit to the ancient Church. Nevertheless! Courtesy of a quirky little reading from the Acts of the Apostles, followed by a small handful of readings from 1st Corinthians, we've been knee deep in the Holy Spirit, pretty much from the beginning of the New Year. Let's recap.

Way back on January 11th, as we marked the Feast of Christ's Baptism, we read, in Acts, of a group of Samaritans who had been led to faith by a deacon named Philip, who somehow managed to baptise these folks in the name of Jesus without conveying to them the Holy Spirit. When Church headquarters in Jerusalem gets wind of these developments, they dispatch Peter and John to rectify the situation, completing the entry of those Samaritans into the life of the Church through the gift of the Holy Spirit. It's a little story, but an important story all the same: one that reminds Christians—including us comparatively staid mainline Protestant Christians—that the Holy Spirit isn't an optional add-on, but is integral to the life of Christian faith. So far, so good! But then....!

...but then we began a mini-journey through a three-chapter section of Paul's first letter to the Christians in Corinth: a section of that letter (chapters 12, 13 and 14) in which Paul discusses the issues those Christians appear to be having with the Spirit, specifically with the Spiritual Gifts that had been lavished upon them. As I argued when we first encountered this portion of the letter, the sticking point for Paul seems to have been the way in which some of the Corinthians were valuing the gift of tongues over and above every other gift. And so Paul, in chapter 12, first speaks of the **variety** of gifts God's Spirit offers. Then, he goes on to speak of the ultimate **unity** of those gifts...and of the horrendous waste that occurs when those gifts produce disunity rather than its opposite. Then, last week, we heard him to remind them that the greatest of God's gifts is the **gift of love**, that love is the one gift to which they all ought to aspire. Finally, this morning—as Paul brings his argument to a close in the 14th chapter of this lengthy epistle—here in this 14th chapter Paul caps his argument by insisting...

...well, by insisting precisely what? How exactly does Paul conclude his elaborate exploration of the spiritual gifts?

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I want to propose a thought experiment. I want you to imagine, if you will, a community in which a particular practice was causing deep division within the community. The problem, at least in part, was that the practice in question—let's name it as speaking in tongues—the practice in question was one in which only some members of the community were equipped to share. In theory that should hardly be the end of the world...since no community is going to be possessed of individuals who are identical in every particular. Vive la difference! Variety is the spice of life! That is...variety is the spice of life until one particular spice, one particular variety, starts to tell all of the others that they are the cat's meow: that they, who are able to practice this tongue speaking, are in effect the community's elite! In fact: so certain are they of their special status, that they're even beginning to question whether or not those who don't speak in tongues really belong to the community. Fun and games, eh! But that, I believe, is pretty much the situation Paul was trying to address back then. Which leads me to the obvious question...and the real point of this little thought experiment!

Why didn't Paul simply tell them to eliminate the practice? Why didn't Paul simply tell them that tongue-speaking, henceforth, was simply verboten! Out of bounds! Out of line! Out of the question! They were not to indulge in it: end of discussion. Get it out of the community's life ASAP, and hope that human memory, being as fragile as it is, would do the rest so that—within a generation—no one would have the faintest idea what you were even talking about were you to raise the topic of speaking in tongues. Why didn't Paul tell them to cease and desist?

Please notice that Paul, though he might well have been the first to ban the practice, most certainly would not have been the last to do so. We mainline Protestants often manage to speak of the broader evangelical world as if it's some sort of monolithic phenomenon; nothing could be further from the truth. And yes, there are Churches in that world where tongue-speaking and other charismatic phenomenon are the norm and expectation, other Churches in that world where tongue-speaking is accepted but far from the norm, but still other Churches in that world in which someone who began speaking in tongues during a worship service or church meeting would be likelier to be greeted with an exorcism than with a hearing! Indeed! Those of you who were part of the life of the Church on Vancouver Island—including the life of this congregation—back in the 70s and early 80s will understand only too well just why it is that some Christian faith traditions want nothing whatsoever to do with tongues and with the other more demonstrative manifestations one sometimes encounters in charismatic worship. And yet Paul, for all of his caution, most certainly does not challenge the validity of what happens when Christians speak in tongues.

Despite all of the conflict, despite all of the misunderstanding, despite all of the misuse and abuse: the one thing Paul does not say is for those who speak in tongues to stop doing so. Quite the opposite! He insists, quite vehemently: *I would like all of you to speak in tongues!* But why? Given all that he has seen and experienced in Corinth, why in the world would he say that?? Despite all of the evidence to the contrary, why yearn for the gift of tongues?

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Well: I suppose the basic answer—basic, nothing fancy here, and yet essential—I suppose the basic answer begins by noting that Paul never considered banishing tongues because he regarded tongues, misunderstandings and misappropriations notwithstanding, as a genuine gift from God, which is to say, a genuine gift of the Spirit. The fact that the gift can be abused—the fact that so many of us are overweight is likely the most visible evidence of the way in which good gifts can be abused!—the fact that this gift much like just about any other gift can and often is abused, does not make it any less a gift. And I think, in many ways, the key point is the one Paul makes when he explains why he considers prophecy a greater gift than tongues:

Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophecy build up the church.

Incidentally, that is why I like to refer to speaking-in-tongues as ecstatic speech: because the use of that word **ecstatic** goes a long way, I think, to explaining what is at stake here. Most of us, you see, at some point in time have had a mountain-top experience or certainly yearn to have such an experience: a moment (sometimes in contemplation, sometimes in worship, sometimes in nature)...a moment in which we are so caught up in an experience of God, that we have a deep conviction—even if it is but a passing conviction—a deep conviction that God is alive, that magic is afoot. Ecstatic speech is one such experience: I would argue an especially life-giving experience for the one who is caught up in a moment of such ecstasy. Indeed, those who have been gifted with that gift, will testify that it has provided them, over the years, with a beautiful personal resource: a shelter from the storm, a place in which they are gifted with the presence of God even at that times—perhaps especially at those times—when life's challenges threaten to overwhelm.

And Paul's point, of course, is that such an experience is surely a God sent experience. God wants that for God's people; God wants that for all God's people. God wants to build up...even at those times when God has no choice but first to tear down: no choice but to tear down our idols, our false priorities, our misguided obsessions. Even as God tears down the idols, God's ultimate purpose is to edify, to build up: and all of the gifts (each and every one of them) are meant to do precisely that. Thus Paul's preference for prophecy over tongues, arguing that tongues—unless interpretation is available—only builds up

the one speaking the tongue, whereas a prophetic word can build up the Church, can build up God's people. And yes, it goes without saying...

...but given the teasing way in which I ended last Sunday's sermon I had better be certain to say it!...

...it goes without saying that this also explains why "love" takes pride of place in Paul's spiritual vision. Remember the point I made at the close of my sermon last Sunday: namely that 1st Corinthians 13 (Paul's great chapter on love) begins by insisting upon the primacy of love, proceeds to name some of the building blocks of love, and then concludes by celebrating the eternity of love. As I also pointed out, the one thing Paul fails to do in that beautiful chapter, is to explain just why it is that love occupies pride of place. But it's here—here in chapter 14—that Paul's rationale becomes crystal clear: love, the *agape* love, the self-giving love Paul praises in 1st Corinthians 13, is the greatest of God's gifts precisely because it is the one through which we seek to build up others: much as God is pouring God's own self out on our behalf, seeking to build us up, seeking to shape us into a living edifice! To say that God is love, is to be reminded that it is God's way—that it is the **defining way** of the God who came to us in Jesus—to pour Himself out that we might be filled up. And yes: to say that our core job assignment as disciples—as followers of this Jesus—to say that our core job assignment as disciples is to love one another, is to be reminded that the Spirit's gifts (including the most ecstasy producing of those gifts) are given that we, in our own way, might do the same for others: to build up, to build up the Church, and through the Church, to offer blessing and healing (light and life and love) to God's broken world, to God's hurting people.

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A final thought.

As I noted at the outset, this morning marks the final Sunday in what has been a whirlwind tour through an especially brief season following the feast of the Epiphany. Here, in the United Church and in many other mainline Protestant Churches, we have come to mark this Sunday as Transfiguration Sunday: the Sunday when Jesus granted John, James and Peter a brief glimpse of the glory that would be his in the aftermath of Easter. As he stands upon the Holy Mountain—first side by side with Moses and Elijah, subsequently all on his own—John, James and Peter behold Christ in his full radiance, in his full glory as Messiah and Lord. While it is only right that we recognize the uniqueness not only of that moment-in-time, but of the way in which that moment-in-time shines an immovable spot-light upon the Lord...

...it's not for nothing that the Christian tradition also sees in that moment, a promise of the future glory, the future radiance, God desires **for us all**. In the unforgettable words of 1st John: *Beloved, we are God's children now;*

*what we will be has not yet been revealed. But what we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. **When he is revealed, we will be like him.*** The point being that it is this very God—this God who seeks to transfigure us—who is the giver of every good gift. And yes: it is this God who urges us, in word and in deed, to make lavish use of those gifts not only for ourselves but for others. Gifts offered to us in love. Gifts we are to offer to one another...and to the world: that we might truly know...that the world might truly know...the One who has brought us to this gracious day, the One who has promised, at the end of time, to bring us safely and radiantly home.

May it be so! In the name of the risen and transfigured Christ! Amen!!!