

Ecclesia Spiritus, Part 5: Ecclesia of the Kingdom

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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:1-27

In this series we've been taking a close look at the early Christian community, seeking to uncover just what it was that made them such a happy and hopeful community overall, despite the fact that they faced challenges that were, in many respects, far greater than many Christians face today who are far less happy. As we in modern times look to a future that is uncertain and sometimes intimidating, we may find that the faith and values of our ancient ancestors provide a source of inspiration and strength – and happiness – that is as relevant today as it was back then.

Paul's letter to the church in Corinth provides a particularly interesting window into the ancient Christian world. This church, like many, was full of pagans who had found Christian faith to be so compelling that they converted to this new religion despite the severe social and political impact it had on their lives, and even their survival during periods of persecution. Why would they convert when conversion came with such consequences?

In our passage this morning, Paul gives us some clues. He starts by saying this:

What I want to talk about now is the various ways God's Spirit gets worked into our lives. This is complex and often misunderstood, but I want you to be informed and knowledgeable. Remember how you were when you didn't know God, led from one phony god to another, never knowing what you were doing, just doing it because everybody else did it? It's different in this life. God wants us to use our intelligence, to seek to understand as well as we can. (1 Corinthians 12:1-2)

The first thing this statement reveals is that the early Christian community considered itself to be a community of the Holy Spirit. They believed that since we were created in God's image and likeness, something of God's Spirit resides within all human beings – not just kings and emperors as many people believed in their day. This simple understanding, while common among Christians in our day, was revolutionary in the first century and continues to be revolutionary in the 21st century in certain parts of the world.

I remember clearly my experience of speaking with the bishop of the Church of South India in the city of Trivandrum while on sabbatical in 2004. In the bishop's district, Christianity was growing so fast they could hardly keep up with the new converts. They were literally growing by a church a month! Yet, when I visited the bishop's church, their worship service was little different than most any mainline Protestant church in America. When I asked the bishop why his diocese was growing so rapidly, he explained that most of the growth was coming from the Dalit community. Dalits are also

known as the “Untouchables” – people who were so low in the cast system of India that they are considered out-cast, or beneath any existing cast. These are people who grow up believing that they are the human equivalent of garbage and are treated as such by the greater society. While the cast system has been officially banned in India for many years, it is still very much alive, particularly in the rural areas. There, the highest vocation that many Dalits can ever hope to go into is as a bathroom attendant or taxi driver. Not even the dogs that belong to Dalits are allowed to wander into neighborhoods of people of cast. In other words, among the lowest of the low, the Dalits are lower still.

So when these Dalits visit a Christian church and hear the very words that we’ve heard this morning, they’re not thinking, “Ho hum, when will worship end so I can go to brunch.” Their worlds turn upside down. They ask, “You mean to tell me that I, a Dalit, am created in God’s very image and likeness, and that God’s Spirit is at work in my life? I want to hear more about this! A lot more ...” This is the very kind of reaction Christians were hearing in Paul’s day as well among pagans who were raised in a religious system that taught that connection to the divine was reserved only for society’s highest, most important leaders. If you weren’t closely connected to these leaders in some way, perhaps as a state official or wealthy elite, you had little expectation of connecting with the divine or being treated with the respect of one who is.

While it’s easy for us in America to look at the Indian context, or the ancient Greek one, and shake our heads at how certain segments of society were treated, I wonder how the ancient Christians would evaluate our society where we claim that everyone is equal but continue to treat certain classes of people as if they don’t matter as much as others. Two thousand years after Jesus came, we still struggle with issues of human dignity and equality in churches where women are not considered to be authentic spiritual leaders, or in greater society where people of color, or the working poor, or the LGBTQ community finds it hard to be treated with the respect that our faith indicates they should be.

I wonder how the ancient Christians, who often found themselves in Roman prison cells, would consider how we treat people who are in prison today, where our penal system operates by the principles of retributive justice rather than restorative justice. Or how would they judge how we treat people who experience mental challenges or who are addicted to drugs or alcohol? Do we see them as captives whom Jesus was sent to set free, or as drags on society?

I don’t find in Paul’s letter a call for “political correctness” in this regard, especially when his observation that God’s Spirit is connected to everyone would equally include white males, the rich, and anyone else thought to be “privileged”. No, I hear in Paul’s letter a call to get happy: to look into the eyes of those who may be different from us and see something of God’s light within them and treat them this way; to look out at the world and realize that everyone struggles in one way or another – including the “privileged” – and to be less judgmental and condemning when the struggles of others may be a bit more obvious than our own struggles. Perhaps by looking at others with softer, more

compassionate eyes, we would also learn to see ourselves this way and really hear these words of Paul:

*God's various gifts are handed out **everywhere**; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are carried out **everywhere**; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action **everywhere**; but God himself is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: **Everyone** gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and **to all kinds of people!** (1 Corinthians 12:4-7)*

Can you really hear what Paul is saying here? When he speaks of “all kinds of people,” he includes not just other people but you as well. It was a foundational belief among early Christians that God was at work in their lives, no matter who they are. While they were far from perfect, Christianity grew like wildfire among people who came to believe that these words were far more than words, but reflected the basic foundation upon which all human life and society was to be ordered.

If you can't quite hear the buoyancy and optimism behind Paul's words for you personally, perhaps these next words will put some flesh and bone on what he's seeing – literally. Forgive the long quote, but everything Paul has to say here matters for us this morning:

You can easily enough see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts - limbs, organs, cells - but no matter how many parts you can name, you're still one body. It's exactly the same with Christ. By means of his one Spirit, we all said good-bye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which he has the final say in everything. (This is what we proclaimed in word and action when we were baptized.) Each of us is now a part of his resurrection body, refreshed and sustained at one fountain - his Spirit - where we all come to drink. The old labels we once used to identify ourselves - labels like Jew or Greek, slave or free - are no longer useful. We need something larger, more comprehensive.

I want you to think about how all this makes you more significant, not less. A body isn't just a single part blown up into something huge. It's all the different-but-similar parts arranged and functioning together. If Foot said, "I'm not elegant like Hand, embellished with rings; I guess I don't belong to this body," would that make it so? If Ear said, "I'm not beautiful like Eye, limpid and expressive; I don't deserve a place on the head," would you want to remove it from the body? If the body was all eye, how could it hear? If all ear, how could it smell? As it is, we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it.

But I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a part of. An enormous eye or a gigantic hand wouldn't be a body, but a monster. What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its

proper place. No part is important on its own. Can you imagine Eye telling Hand, "Get lost; I don't need you"? Or, Head telling Foot, "You're fired; your job has been phased out"? As a matter of fact, in practice it works the other way - the "lower" the part, the more basic, and therefore necessary. You can live without an eye, for instance, but not without a stomach. When it's a part of your own body you are concerned with, it makes no difference whether the part is visible or clothed, higher or lower. You give it dignity and honor just as it is, without comparisons. If anything, you have more concern for the lower parts than the higher. If you had to choose, wouldn't you prefer good digestion to full-bodied hair?

The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don't, the parts we see and the parts we don't. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance. You are Christ's body - that's who you are! You must never forget this. Only as you accept your part of that body does your "part" mean anything. (1 Corinthians 12:12-27)

Note to the reader:

The rest of this sermon is devoted to a dialog between myself and Anne Ginn, a certified Spiritual Director from Creighton University (and Robyn Hubbard's sister-in-law!) who is trained in the Enneagram. The Enneagram is a way of describing the diversity of the human spirit that has ancient roots that many believe go back to the "Desert Fathers" – Christians of the early Christian era who deliberately stepped out of the flow of human society to see the "forest for the trees". There in the desert they noticed that the human spirit is connected to nine primary energies. While each person is intimately connected with all nine energies, we each tend to gather ourselves around one of them. The Enneagram is an attempt to describe what each of these energies is like and how they are worked out in the lives of those who resonate with them.

One of the benefits of studying the Enneagram is that it swiftly becomes evident that Paul and the early church were on to something important about how God created us, and why it is so important to learn to appreciate our differences rather than privilege one way of being in the world over another. We are all meant to be distinct from one another even as we are ultimately connected with one another through God's Spirit.

Understanding our similarities and differences in this way is a helpful approach for appreciating the gifts that each of us brings to the human family. Our job is not to turn everyone around us into mini versions of ourselves, but to appreciate the unique gifts (and struggles) given to each human being and endeavor to help them become the person who God created them to be.

When we realize what our job is, it is far easier to look out at the world with soft eyes, realizing that certain ways of being in the world that don't resonate with us personally may be perfectly fine and right for another person. It allows us to bridge our differences

with grace and understanding rather than trying to force others to become copies of ourselves.

This way of understanding differences allows us to cut ourselves some slack, as well as others. We may not always fit in with others around us, but sometimes those things that others don't appreciate about us are the very things that God gave us to bless the world. When it really sinks in what God is up to in the diverse human family, we discover a critical key to happiness – our happiness and that of others.

While I cannot reproduce my conversation with Anne, I am attaching to this sermon a summary of the nine energies or “types” of the Enneagram. For what it's worth, I am a “Type 5” on the Enneagram and Chris Alexander is a “Type 7.” Can you find yourself and your loved ones in this summary?

Attachments: Riso/Hudson: the Wisdom of the Enneagram © 1999 and “Enneagram Dinner Party” cartoon.