

Standing in Awe of the Mystery
A Sermon on 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ May 24, 2026

There are many things for us to be thankful for as we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the founding of St. Paul's. One of my favorite parts of our bicentennial celebration is the articles that are appearing the weekly newsletter and in *The Courier* about the history of St. Paul's. These are being written by members of our History Task Force.

Do you know the names of the people who are members of the History Task Force? There are seven members: Betsy Barker, Liz Belden-Handler, Doug Mouncey, Amy Mangram, Laurie Sanderson, Anita Wagner and Marion Greenhalgh, the chair of the Task Force. Don't be surprised if you cannot name the members of the History Task Force. I had to ask Marion for the names of the members.

There's a reason you do not know the names of the members of the History Task Force; they do their work when very few people are in the building. Most of us have never walked through the Brewster Room as they were meeting, perhaps working their way through hundred year old newspaper articles and black and white photographs from the 1950s. But the fact that you have never seen them working does not mean they haven't been hard at work. The members of the History task force are spending several hundred hours researching and telling the story of St. Paul's Church.

It's the same way with the work of the Holy Spirit. Most of the time we are not paying much attention to the work of the Holy Spirit, the same way most of us are not thinking very much about the work of St. Paul's History Task Force.

The difference is that, if you decide you want to learn more about the work of the History Task Force, you can contact Marion and ask to attend one of their meetings. If you attend one of their meetings you will be able to see a small part of their work. There is a lot you will not be able to see because much of the work is being done by task force members in their own homes.

It's more difficult for us to see the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not hold a task force meeting. The Holy Spirit does not write articles that are printed in *The Courier*. The Holy Spirit does create beautiful visual displays of the history of the church.

When it comes to seeing the work of the Holy Spirit, we are fairly blind. You and I can be staring straight at something that is the work of the Holy Spirit and not recognize it. The few times we have a pretty good idea we are looking at the work of the Holy Spirit, we are often looking back at work the Holy Spirit accomplished weeks, or months, or years before.

When I applied to be the Rector at St. Paul's, I lived in Wyoming and had never been to Syracuse, NY. Do you know how I came to apply to serve as your priest? Most of the reason comes down to a message that was sent to me by a woman named Judy.

Eleven years ago, Judy was the Transition Minister for the Diocese of Central New York. Judy is a very wise woman. She is married to a man who was a Presbyterian pastor. It turns out that the people who have the best understanding of the way the church works are not the clergy people, but the people who are married to the clergy people.

Judy was very observant, and she understood a lot about churches and about the clergy people who lead the churches. When it was time for me to leave Wyoming I wrote to the transition officers in several diocese, including the Diocese of Central New York. Judy wrote back and sent me materials for churches in the diocese that were searching for new priests, including St. Paul's.

I read the materials and wrote back to Judy. I must have responded that I didn't think it would be a good idea for me to apply to serve as the priest at St. Paul's, because Judy wrote back to me and said, "I really want you to take another look at the profile for St. Paul's. I think this might be a very good match for you." The past ten years make a pretty good argument that I was wrong, and Judy was right.

How did Judy know? She had never met me before; she had just read my application and resume. I can only guess that the Holy Spirit must have played some role in what happened. The Holy Spirit seems to play a role in helping people come together in productive, joyful ways.

In those few occasions when we have some awareness that the Holy Spirit has been working among us, the awareness comes long after she has completed her task. In many situations awareness of the work of the Holy Spirit comes to an individual. More rarely, a community of people becomes aware of the work of the Holy Spirit among them.

This is what makes the story of Pentecost so unusual. The community of disciples were all together in one place, and they became aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit among them. But the story of Pentecost is fairly exceptional in Holy Scripture.

In most accounts in the Bible, the spirit of God comes upon a single person, and guides them through a challenging or unusual situation. For instance, when the prophet Samuel went to the house of Jesse to anoint a new king for Israel, Samuel was the only one who was aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit, guiding him.

In most cases, St. Paul's description of the work of the Holy Spirit provides the most helpful, realistic guidance for us. In his letter to the Corinthians Paul writes, *No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.* Let's remember that Paul's congregation in Corinth was extremely diverse, in terms of wealth, education, national background and social status. So the implications of this statement are profound. *No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.* There is equality among all of the members of the congregation in Corinth in spite of their diversity, because each member is being guided by the Holy Spirit.

The same thing is true for us today. As people whose faith is built on the Holy Scripture, we make the claim that each person has equal status in our congregation. Men are not superior to women and women are not superior to men. The priest is not superior to the members. The new members are not superior to the experienced members and the experienced members are not superior to the newer member.

We have equal status before God, regardless of the color of our skin, regardless of our economic status. We are equal members of the congregation because, even though we cannot see exactly the way the Holy Spirit is working among us, the Gospel indicates each person has been led to this place by the Holy Spirit.

Paul says, *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.* Paul's statement goes hand in hand with what Jesus tells us about not judging other people. We are following the Gospel message when we refrain from judging people who make different decisions than we make, because, as disciples of Jesus, we believe that the Holy Spirit is manifested in different ways among different people.

St. Paul gives us one criterion for identifying works of the Holy Spirit. *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* People who are being guided by the Holy Spirit are working for the common good.

The community shaped by the Gospel is a community where each person is treated as an equal member. It's a community where a diversity of spiritual gifts is welcomed and supported. It's a community where people work together for the common good of God's people.

In the next passage Paul describes some of the work of the Spirit. Let's notice that, even though some people in Corinth assumed that the power of speaking in tongues is the greatest gift of the Spirit, Paul places speaking in tongues and the interpretation of speaking in tongues as the last of the gifts on the list. As is true in our time, people in Corinth were especially impressed by unusual, visible, dramatic displays of spiritual power. According to Paul, we should give more of our attention to the quiet, nearly invisible work of the Holy Spirit.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body-- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free-- and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For St. Paul and for us, the most important work of the Holy Spirit, is the work that has knit us into one body.

We do not see how it happens. We are nearly blind when it comes to seeing her at work. If we have some awareness of what God has accomplished, we stand in awe of the mystery. We have been formed us as the Body of Christ, given for the sake of the world. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.