

Reorientation and Resistance

A Sermon on 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 by the Rev. Philip Major

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This week we especially remember the ideas and actions of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Martin Luther King is the only individual honored with a national holiday in the United States. Given his place in the history of our nation, we sometimes forget, or might be surprised to learn that, during his lifetime, Martin Luther King was not universally popular in the United States. During his lifetime there were many people who hated his actions and his words. Many people were highly resistant to his leadership. People were highly resistant to his ideas about equality and the rights and dignity of all persons. People tried to kill him, many times. Eventually they succeeded.

Martin Luther King was a Christian pastor, and almost all of his ideas and actions were deeply rooted in Holy Scripture. Let's consider that many people who resisted Martin Luther King's ideas would have also described themselves as Christians. Many people who resisted Martin Luther King's ideas and leadership attended Christian worship services, at least occasionally. During his lifetime many people were highly resistant to Martin Luther King's ideas because accepting his ideas would mean that they would have to change their behavior and their thinking about the world. People were resistant to Martin Luther King's ideas because accepting his ideas would mean they would have to change their understanding about what it meant to be a follower of Jesus.

St. Paul, was dealing with the same issue in his work with the church of Christ followers in Corinth. People were resistant to Paul's ideas because accepting his ideas would mean they would have to change their understanding about what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. In the letter we call First Corinthians, Paul provides them with a reorientation about what it means to be a follower of Christ.

If we want to understand the meaning of Paul's letters to the Corinthians, it helps to know a little bit about this congregation and this city. The city of Corinth is located in a strategic location, on a narrow peninsula that connected the two most populous parts of Ancient Greece. The road that connected north and south, Athens and Sparta, ran right through Corinth.

The other important thing for us to know about Corinth is that the Roman Emperor cleared the city of its traditional inhabitants about 100 years before Paul's time. Then the city was rebuilt with immigrants from all over the Roman Empire. Corinth was a happening place and a melting pot of the Roman Empire, with people of all cultures and religions, and lots of economic diversity. But, as was true all over the ancient world, there were many more poor people than middle class or rich people.

Paul's congregation in Corinth reflected this diversity. There were a few rich, well-educated people, many poor people and not many middle-class people. Paul gathered this congregation in Corinth several years before this letter was written. Paul seems to have been restless, because he was constantly moving on to the next place. After Paul left the church in Corinth to establish a new church in a new place, he wrote letters to them, and they wrote letters back to him. In First and Second Corinthians Paul is responding directly to questions and ideas that were presented to him in letters from the Corinthians. They probably wrote these letters as a group, because most people could not read or write, and the letters had to be carried on a long voyage by a trusted individual. We can imagine the people sitting around in a circle, saying to the person writing, "Don't forget to ask him about whether it's ok for us to attend the pagan religious festivals!".

In the first eleven chapters of his letter to the Corinthians Paul has addressed many of the specific issues and questions the Corinthians brought to his attention. Paul begins chapter twelve with a response to a specific question, but Paul goes well beyond their specific questions to articulate a universal foundation for Christians as we live and work together.

The Corinthians have asked him a question about people who have especially visible spiritual gifts, such as the gift of speaking in tongues. Paul begins his response, saying: *Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed.* As usual, the more powerful people in the

church have divided the congregation into the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. The ones who can speak in tongues think they are the only ones who possess spiritual gifts.

Paul has a serious reorientation in store for them, and for the entire congregation. He reminds them that a few years previous, most of them knew nothing at all of the teachings of Christ or Holy Scripture: *You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak.* Then he resorts to some dramatic language to make his point: *Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!"* Of course, the Corinthians are not saying, "let Jesus be cursed." They all make the same basic confession, which is to say, "Jesus is Lord." Paul points toward their common gift, saying: *no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.*

The Corinthians are surrounded by a culture much like ours, where people are given positions in a strict hierarchy based on their education, their gender, their nationality and their wealth or lack of wealth. Some members of the congregation are bringing these social divisions into the church, and assume that those who can read and write, and those who can speak in tongues are better than the others. In their minds, only a few people are in possession of spiritual gifts, and those in possession of spiritual gifts are deserving of greater respect and status. After all, this is the way it works outside the church.

Paul articulates a new way of looking at our spiritual gifts, and our relationships to others in our community, based on the foundation of Christ's example and teaching. *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.* Then Paul commences with a partial listing of various spiritual gifts. Paul concludes, saying *All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.*

There are varieties of gifts; there are differences among us. In the Christian congregation the differences in individual gifts and behavior do not lead to a hierarchy of power and respect. The different gifts given to each person are a blessing, not a curse. The differences among us are intentional, not accidental. The allotment of different gifts to different people is God's way of getting God's work accomplished. Each person has been given gifts by God, and we are equal in the eyes of God. Within the Christian community, your special gift or my special gift are never grounds for boasting, they are grounds for service.

This is pretty much backwards from the way things work outside the church. In the world outside the church, those with special talents expect others to serve them and give them extra respect. Within the church, those with special talents are expected to use those talents, not to build up their own honor or wealth, but to serve the community.

People in Paul's Church in Corinth were resistant to this new idea of equality. People were resistant to Paul's idea that those with different gifts and different approaches to the challenges of community deserved just as much honor. People were resistant to the idea that the custodian and the priest, the laborer and the poet play equal, critical roles in accomplishing God's work in the world.

Jesus experienced a similar sort of resistance. Even his closest disciples were surprised and argued with him about his actions and words. Jesus was offering them a reorientation, a new way of looking at relationships, but many people did not want to change their ways. People were highly resistant to his ideas about equality and the rights and dignity of all persons. People tried to kill him, many times. Eventually they succeeded.

We see similar struggles going on in our own lives. There is always at least a little bit of resistance in us to the idea that all people, even my enemies, are deserving of equal respect and dignity. All of us hold onto the idea that my particular approach is correct, and others are misguided.

Jesus, Paul, and Martin provided us with a new orientation to our relationships with one another. They ask us to not think of ourselves as better than others. They ask us to treat one another as equals. They encourage us to let our minds be changed, and consider our differences to be a blessing, not a curse.