

“Less Talking, More Living”

Rev. David Gregory

January 16, 2022

2nd Sunday after Epiphany



Readings

1 Corinthians 12:4-7

from the Common English Bible

There are different spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; and there are different ministries and the same Source; and there are different activities but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. A demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good.

John Pavlovitz

in his book *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community*

Here's the thing about the ocean: until you experience it, no one can explain it to you, and once you have experienced it, no one needs to. The love of God is this way. For far too long, Christians have been content with telling people about the ocean and believing that this is enough. We've spoken endlessly of a God whose lavish love is beyond measure

The world doesn't need more talking from us. It doesn't need our sweet platitudes or our eloquent speeches or our passionate preaching or our brilliant exegesis. These are all just words about the ocean, and ultimately they fail to adequately describe it. The world needs the goodness of God incarnated in the flesh of the people who claim to know this good God.

I have been repeating myself for the last four years, but what you may not know is that it did not begin here at CCC. You can ask my former congregations. How many times have you heard me say, “No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey” ? There's another way I could complete that sentence: *No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are facing a dilemma.* No matter where you live, no matter your spiritual lineage or faith tradition, no matter what your age, your race, your ethnic origins, your gender identity or expression, no matter your socio-economic conditions, no matter your family structure, your abilities or disabilities—IT DOES NOT MATTER WHO YOU ARE—you are facing the dilemma of cultural polarization, and it touches every aspect of life, every relationship, every interaction, every choice, every institution. It permeates how we think and feel, how we live and work in this world, and how we view the future.

We could create a symposium to explain how this situation came to be, but that's not our purpose today (we're all pretty well schooled in that, anyhow). It really boils down to only one simple idea: *diversity*. Is it a good thing or a bad thing? Should diversity be sought and cultivated, or should it be shunned and avoided? This is not just a 21st Century question, by the way. You could ask the ancient Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Medo-Persians, the Greeks, or the Romans, for example, and they would tell you how they felt about domination, not diversity. Adolf Hitler was not interested in diversity, and neither is Vladimir Putin. From my own field of study, I can tell you that through the centuries the church has struggled with this same question—all the way back to the first century—when there was an innate tendency to value certain people and gifts over others. The church in Corinth is synonymous with that struggle. The first letter to the Corinthians was sent to address the intense polarities and divisions among the people there.

A thorough reading of this letter will tell you that its recipients were discriminatory in the feeding of the poor, being greedy with what they had. They gave greater status to people who had certain gifts that they valued more than others, and the devaluing of certain gifts led to the devaluing of people. It created serious divisions that became ingrained, and it turned that gathering of Corinthians into something that bore no resemblance to the core message of Jesus, which was to love your neighbor as yourself. According to the letter, the path to healing the divide was the acknowledgement that every person has a gift to bring to the table for the common good. An apostle is not more important than a deacon (who at that time served tables). The idea is analogous to the human body, which if it were all just an eye, or a hand or a foot, would be meaningless, useless, and pretty grotesque. There are people who are gifted at speaking and teaching; there are those who are prompted to do acts of service; some people find it easy to pray a LOT. Some people sing and create beautiful works of art and music. The greatest gift of all, however, is love. And love isn't about which gift you have; it's about the action that grows from it.

John Pavlovitz is a prolific, eloquent, and outspoken preacher, teacher, and author who has invited us on his transformative journey over the years. His origins are in the very polarized world of evangelicalism, a system in which he participated as a youth pastor at the beginning. Maybe it was something within himself, maybe it was the honesty of the young people he worked with; maybe it was both. But he began speaking and writing about diversity and the love of God in a way that got him fired. And when he got fired, he got fired up, and it propelled him into a world of progressive Christianity, where he began exercising his spiritual gift of calling out the BS wherever and whenever he saw it. He's not worried about who he offends. He colors outside all the lines of religion and politics, since according to him, the fundamentalists have never worried about that anyhow. Pavlovitz has a blog called "Stuff That Needs to Be Said." He has a YouTube channel, puts out devotional books, Advent and Lent resources, and he has published a number of books, the latest of which is entitled *If God Is Love, Don't Be a Jerk*. In the last year, he has undergone surgery and treatment for brain tumors, and if anything, the experience made him produce more, say more, and say it faster. Sometimes I feel envious of him. There are times when I hear him speak and wish I had the courage to say what he says. But the truth is, I have different gifts to bring to this table, so I bring what I bring and welcome what he brings.

Ironically, for all his talking, Pavlovitz says that "the world doesn't need more talking from us. The world needs the goodness of God incarnated in the flesh of the people who claim to know this good God." What the world needs most from us is love, and love is not about talking, it's about living. Love is not about sentimentality or platitudes; it's about doing. Love is about gifted people (everyone) sharing their gifts at the same table, and when it truly works this way, no one has to talk about it at all. Love is its own message.

Without love, none of it matters. And that's the key to our entire dilemma. None of the posturing, none of the arguments, none of the political polarities matter. If we trail off into the endless cycles of human hatred—and we all can easily do so—without love, nothing matters. This is also the answer to every question we have about our church and its current challenges, about our present moment in a new way of being together and in the world. It's about our resources, our dreams, our limitations, and our future vision.

Whatever the question, the answer is love. This isn't about pious platitudes or uber-spirituality. Love is action. Love says you don't have to be just like me or to like what I like. And I don't always have to have what I like. Why? Because we love our neighbor—our diverse neighbor—as we love ourselves. We care for others and treat each other the way we like to be treated. We have often said, and we *would* say we believe that God's love is big enough to reach everyone, including the greatest saint and the worst of criminals. God loves Democrats and Republicans. God loves libertarians, authoritarians, Presbyterians and librarians (!). And deep within our souls where Divinity dwells, our inner being loves them too. And that is why when we try to hate them, we feel so awful. It's incongruent with who we are as temples of divine light and Holy Spirit.

Most of the time we take the simplest thing and make it the most complicated. Let's stop arguing, explaining, and exegeting our way into a place of perceived dominance. Let's recognize the vast ocean that love is, and instead of trying to sift it all into personal preferences or theological categories (just try sifting the ocean, by the way), let's come to a place where we just take others to the shore and point at it. Less talking, more living. Less talking, more loving, more giving. Just look at the diversity of the ecosystem around us. Enough said.

