

Are All Apostles?

Sermon for August 8th, 2010, based on selected verses from I Cor. 12.

Carl Thomas

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This is a church sermon. The question that Paul asks [Are All Apostles?] is a rhetorical question (which, by the way, he answers). And the consuming passion of Paul is the community that we now call the church. Always, and everywhere his advice moves people to relate to one another in the community, to support each other, to love each other. To comfort, encourage, admonish one another. That's church. So this is about us.

Paul had trouble with his churches. By the time this letter had been written to the church in Corinth, Paul had founded several; more were to come. Someone in Corinth had written a letter to Paul complaining about the strife in the congregation and Paul seems somewhat exasperated as he writes back. Here in the 12th chapter he reminds them of basics, in somewhat more detail than he had in the first few verses of the letter. Inference suggests that some of the members, probably more well-heeled than the rest, were lording it over the others, and using their privileged status in the city to take advantage of some of the other members. What's more, they were possibly claiming that such was their due. Privileged people do that on occasion – just check the severance package for the disgraced BP American exec., among others.

Paul also had assumed, in every one of his new churches, that *all* of the members, if that's what they were called (we don't really know) had received the Holy Spirit, every last one. He cited as evidence gifts of the Spirit manifested in each person. Some of these gifts reflected offices held; some could be seen in the work that they did. Some of his Corinthians showed evidence of several gifts; some hadn't discovered theirs as yet, or at least not all of them. And, it was noticed that some had more of a certain gift than some others. And all of these were to be employed, says Paul, for the edification of the entire church – and beyond. In short, the gifts were to be used to build each other up – and this only. To complicate matters, people didn't seem to grasp very well how all these "gifts" of the Spirit worked.

It's kind of like that at our church here at 21st and J. We're not always sure what God has given us either, are we?

OK. That sets up most of the problem in the Corinthian letter.

A few of the people in Paul's new congregation had begun to think that their own gifts were better than others, or qualitatively superior. Some others, as is obvious from Paul's letter, had a very *low* opinion of their own gifts in comparison to others. It's the "yes, I have gifts of the Spirit, but mine don't count as much as yours" idea. Ever feel that way?

Gradually, the situation had encouraged comparison; with the result that some felt superior, others inferior, and the stage was set for lots of unrest and resentment. Thus, someone, or some ones, wrote Paul about it, asking for help. As I said, Paul seems exasperated in his answering letter.

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Let's move our minds to our own situation. Do *we* compare ourselves unfairly with others in the congregation, or with other congregations? While you're answering that in your mind let me suggest that we have to establish some common ground with Corinth and Paul's assessment of his new churches first. In other words, there is one item we have to get pretty clear.....and that is.....Paul's insistence that the presence of the Holy Spirit is in every *one* of the church's people. Paul *assumed* that, said he could *see* it. Is that true for us as well?

Yes, I think it is. *I* can see it; *I* can notice the Holy Spirit present in our midst right here in this congregation. God *comes* to us that way; God *blesses* us that way, particularly when we're open to seeing what God is doing in a great variety of ways. A casual conversation that suddenly contains insight into one's own faith; an event that changes from ordinary to life-changing; hearing someone talk about life experiences in a manner that allows us to see our own history very differently. *That's* God in our midst; that's evidence that God's Holy Spirit is active among us.

Let's expand that a little. Let's consider the idea that we frequently look for God too narrowly, too expectedly; it's almost as though we search for a pattern, and having found it, we don't look for God in any other way. But if we were to *broaden* our view even just a little, we'd become aware of God more *easily*, and more *frequently*.

Let me illustrate: Suppose I expect God to act in a particular way all the time; that's sort of like always looking for God just to my left, *your* right (where I found God a couple of times). Again, using this spatial idea, let's assume that God *is* acting, but over *here*, on the other side. I won't notice this at all, will I? I don't ever look over here, never will. I've restricted my understanding of how God acts and can't see much of what God is doing because I only expect God to act in one particular way (shown here by one particular location).

Armed with a broader perspective, however we can see God's action in our midst everywhere— i.e. the work of the Holy Spirit, as it is termed (you can think of if any way you want to, but this is God acting; call it Holy Spirit [as Paul does here] or call it the presence of Christ; it's God – it's God).

OK. Let's assume that God's Holy Spirit is active, is *here* and active at 21st and J. What are we going to do with it?

Well, we might jockey for power? [I've been around here longer than you; I know how things work here better].

Will we claim that our church is a little better than the rest? [Our morning service is more alive, we're more welcoming, better moving]

Will we claim superiority of wisdom? [Listen, I know the Bible better than you do, so I am more likely to be right about this issue on abortion, or gay rights, or divorce, or ?.....you name it].

Now let's expand our comparison of Spiritual gifts to skills? In preaching, for example [we have better sermons than they do]. Or administration [she can run that church with one hand tied behind her back]. In community involvement [we *do* more for this part of town than any other congregation in the area].

Can we extend our superiority to innovation and sizzle? We have SAM, Staging a Miracle. It's getting city-wide attention; it's helping more people. What have *you* got]?

Enough. We've established that we, too, and probably every other church have problems which are addressed by this letter from Paul. Superiority/inferiority, some gifts actually preferred to some others – in the midst of all this Paul asks, “Are all prophets,” almost mockingly? Certainly not. Is one Spiritual gift better than another? Absurd. There *is* no hierarchy of gifts, claims Paul.

And then, then he goes painting for us this marvelous picture/analogy of parts of the body, read by Mark a short while ago, putting to rest any notion that *any* part is better or lesser than another, and *emphasizing* that each gift in its manifestation is *necessary* for the body, *essential* to having a body at all.

Does that make us feel better, or worse? I'm not sure. Is the Spirit, which is active here, subject to our *distortion* (just like in the church at Corinth)? Oh yes.

But in the daily planning, careful work, attention to creativity, learning about the ministry of Jesus, listening deeply to each other, speaking truth in ways that build each other up, taking seriously the questions from the Bible – we will engage in *responding* to these ideas about what the church is, *can* be, *should* be. And, as God blesses us, we will work out our answers together..... with our lives.