

UNITY IN DIVERSITY
John 17:11, 20-24, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

I give thanks for these occasions when a member of the congregation, like myself, is welcomed to the pulpit. Not because the sermon will probably be a little shorter, but because I enjoy hearing from others. As I learn more of what it means to be a member of the Presbyterian Church (USA), I realize how important it is for members of the congregation to be up at the pulpit from time to time. I hope many of you will consider this opportunity. This sermon was originally planned for the second Sunday after the Epiphany, January 20th. However, this year, the weather forced a change of plans and many of us were digging out from a massive snow storm. So, here we are today and I'm enthusiastic to share with you how I was inspired by the epiphany.

The word Epiphany comes from the Greek word *epiphaneia* or *theophaneia* which means appearance or manifestation of God and has roots in the words for sunrise or dawn. Epiphany celebrates and praises the revelation of God to the world in the person of Jesus Christ. Epiphany not only reveals the Savior to the world but it also calls the world to be a witness to the light of God, to witness for Christ.¹ I ask you now, to thoughtfully listen as I share how I was prayerfully moved by the scripture readings and find them relevant for our time.

I chose to follow part of the recommended lectionary scriptures; Psalm 36 as the Call to Worship and the second New Testament reading from the epistles, 1 Corinthians 12. For the first Gospel reading, I stepped away from the lectionary and chose selections from John 17. I focused on these readings for three reasons. First, Sunday, January 20th came right before the national holiday to honor a great man, Martin Luther King Jr., who through his ministry and his social justice work witnessed to the light of God, Jesus Christ. Second, Reverend Fancher shared with me a very thoughtful litany created by Rev. Henry Pearce from Medina. It is adapted from the Belhar Confession which was approved by the 222nd General Assembly in 2016 and added to the Book of Confession. Third, as many of you know, I am currently studying at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and I appreciate the opportunity to share some of what I am learning which feels related to today's readings. All are meant to help us see our diversity as a unifying gift.

Psalm 36 was written at a time of crisis for Israel. Our selection highlights Israel's desire "always to remain in the sphere of God's presence and deliverance." The Good News translation uses the term constant love. Other translations use steadfast love presenting God's love as unwavering, committed, and persistent. For the author of psalm 36, wickedness was trying to destroy Israel, many continued to worship other gods but the psalmist recognized and had faith that God's steadfast love was the refuge to protect and sustain all life. "You are the source of all life,

and because of your light we see the light.” The epiphany of the psalmist was to see the light of the Lord and his steadfast love as a gift to be praised and glorified.

1 Corinthians 12, addresses the spiritual gifts which for the Church in Corinth was one more controversy that threatened to potentially divide the fellowship. This letter gives us a glimpse into the life of an early Christian community in the Greco-Roman world where polytheism and mysticism were widely practiced. Paul is responding to a letter from some Corinthian church members seeking advice on several issues. Some in the church were using pagan practices from previous mystic beliefs to mimic spiritual gifts in order to lift themselves as more spiritual than others; therefore, of greater importance in the church.

In today’s scripture Paul is countering two damaging inclinations: first, the tendency to elevate one gift only; second, the tendency to overlook the **unifying intention** of the gifts as gifts of the one God and led by the one Spirit. The profound implication is that the Christian community is not authoritarian: the gifts are given by a God who is experienced in a variety of ways and given not just to a privileged few but to everyone. “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” Not for their individual benefit but for the benefit of all and for building up of a holy church in the Spirit.ⁱⁱ

Yes, we are a diverse group of people. We don’t all have the same political opinions, or like the same books, movies, cars, or hobbies. It is obvious we are not united by agreement on all things. I see people of a variety of ages, backgrounds, circumstances, and experiences and when the Spirit dispenses gifts to us, they come out in varied and different ways. But when we put all these gifts together, we form a community; a community held together by Christ.ⁱⁱⁱ We strive to have faith in the power of the one that unites us and to put to good use the variety of gifts given to us.

Recently, I was in a course studying the Polity of the Presbyterian Church (USA). We reviewed the Book of Order and the Book of Confessions. Many of you are familiar with the polity but I think there may be some, like me, that haven’t picked up these books for quite a while. Until the last three years, I hadn’t looked at either book for a deep dive into polity. I’m not a cradle Presbyterian but since I joined the church twelve years ago, I’ve been hanging around with quite a few CP’s and I thought I understood what practicing in the PC USA meant. Now that I’m seeking a ministry role, my studies have required I not just familiarize myself with the polity but that I seek to be engaged and inspired by it. This activity has truly reinforced my decision to be an active member in ministry for the PC USA.

From the foundation section of the Book of Order, the *Unity of the Church* is stated as “God’s gift to the Church in Jesus Christ. Just as God is one God and Jesus Christ is one savior, so the Church is one because it belongs to its one Lord,

Jesus Christ. The Church seeks to include all people and is never content to enjoy the benefits of Christian community for itself alone.^{iv} We are not meant to be an isolated community of believers. Building up of the church is a waste if it is only used for this group of people.

Unity is one of the four marks of the faith; unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. The *catholicity* of the church, with a small “c,” witness to the truth that while particular expressions of the church may differ from time to time and place to place, in essence the church is at all times and everywhere the same church. With this reality in mind, Presbyterians constantly challenge one and other “to testify” to Christ’s embrace of all men, women, and children of all places, races, ages, conditions, and stations in life.^v

During the 1960’s fight for civil rights, it was this communal use of gifts and a unity of the church to support the nonviolent social revolution that Martin Luther King Jr. and so many other people fighting for justice and dignity hoped would materialize. I’d like to take this moment to suggest a reading recommendation. MLK’s letter from the Birmingham Jail. Some of you may have already read this but I think it is definitely worth reading again. It is heartbreaking to read because it is so very obvious that the church did not practice this vital calling of catholicity or unity. After acknowledging the few that took significant stands for civil rights and justice, MLK wrote, “But despite these notable exceptions, I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say that as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say it as a minister of the gospel who loves the church, who was nurtured in its bosom, who has been sustained by its Spiritual blessings, and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.”^{vi}

As I reflected on these words, I saw a parallel with the litany from the Belhar Confession that Jon shared and I couldn’t help but think of current events that have caused so much division. How should the church respond when sin disrupts the church’s unity, creates division among the children of God and constructs unjust systems that steal life from God’s creation? Members and leaders of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa faced these questions under apartheid, a system of laws that separated people by race from 1948-1994. They wrestled with the situation theologically and practically. One outcome of their struggle was the development of the Confession of Belhar in the 1980’s.

The Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa, the church that succeeded the Dutch Reformed Mission Church after apartheid, offered the Confession of Belhar to the global Reformed family as a gift, believing the themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice issue a call from God to the whole church toward holy action, transformation, and life. The Special Committee on the Confession recommended that the PC(USA) add Belhar as part of its constitution because it

believed the clarity of Belhar’s witness to unity, reconciliation, and justice might help the PC(USA) speak and act with similar clarity at a time when it faces division, racism, and injustice.^{vii} As I mentioned earlier, it was approved and added in 2016. The selected verses from John 17 for today, have a special connection with the Belhar confession. This is a moving piece of Scripture, for it is the resurrected Jesus praying for all of us, to be one, united as Christ is united with God.

As individuals, we are unique and God wishes to be in an intimate personal relationship with each one of us, giving each gifts but these are not meant to be for individual benefit; rather as a means to unify, build up, and love; embracing our diversity with a God’s steadfast love that enables a community, seeking to walk humbly, act justly, and praise God. Through our unity we glorify Jesus when God uses us to answer the very intimate prayer of may they be one as you and I are one. If you look at the front of your bulletin, you’ll see an excerpt from the Belhar Confession. May we read this together.

ⁱ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/christianyear/epiphany/lt>
Selected sentences from the opening description of Epiphany.

ⁱⁱ Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible. Pgs. 1340-1341

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.sermonwriter.com/children-sermons/1-corinthians-121-11-community-hyde/>
Excerpts from Dr. Randy L. Hyde, Sermon “Community.”

^{iv} Book of Order 2017-2019, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Part 1, *Foundation of Presbyterian Polity*, “Unity of the Church.” F-1.0302.a.

^v Carlos E. Wilton. *Principles of the Presbyterian Polity*. Geneva Press, Louisville, KY. 2016. Pg. 13.

^{vi} https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf

^{vii} Book of Confession, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Part 2, 2016, pgs. 300-301.