

2 Epiphany – Year C – January 20, 2010 - Homily
Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36: 5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11
Susan E. Wilmot

Paul is very interested in what the people of the church in Corinth have been saying, and how they have been using their speaking in tongues as erroneous evidence of spiritual favoritism. He has a few choice words of his own to share, most of which are just as applicable today as they were those many years ago. To begin our exploration of speaking, I found a few quotes to live by. Here's the first one, "If you wouldn't write it and sign it, don't say it" (Earl Wilson). What about, "Most conversations are simply monologues delivered in the presence of a witness" (Margaret Millar). How about this, "Of those who say nothing, few are silent" (Thomas Neiel). One more, "Talking is like playing on the harp; there is as much in laying the hands on the strings to stop their vibration as in twanging them to bring out their music" (Oliver Wendell Holmes).

The truth, as Paul heard and understood it, was that much of the speaking in the church at Corinth was ill advised bragging, an attempt at spiritual one-upmanship, uninformed, and the kind of clanging noise that he will talk about in 1 Corinthians chapter 13 that does not edify anyone, or build up the Body of Christ. The gift of glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, that seems to have been a special gift to the community at Corinth, is being misused. Paul's response to the church even sounds harsh, as he compares their current problems to being led astray by idols that cannot speak just like pagans. There is no doubt that the tongue can be a dangerous weapon, even as it is also a means to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in love. James (3:8) calls the tongue untamable, a restless evil, full of deadly poison. In Proverbs (15:4) we read, "A gentle tongue is a tree of life." Paul brings the Corinthians back to basics in an effort to remind them of the equality of all members of Christ's body. The words that are most important for all believers are, "Jesus is Lord." Words that Paul tells us cannot be spoken except by the Holy Spirit.

Herein lies the key to Paul's communication with the church. If we cannot speak of Jesus as Lord, except through the Holy Spirit, then we must realize that all our spiritual gifts are just that -- gifts. And when they are gifts of God, they are also gifts of God's grace. In other words, all God's gifts are unearned, undeserved, and impossible to achieve through our own efforts. Each gift is also of equal value in God's sight. Being gifts of God, like all aspects of our lives in Christ, we are stewards of the gifts, not owners. Rightfully mindful of using all our gifts in God's service, how we use our spiritual gifts is just as important to our faithfulness as how we use our money, time, or other resources. The use of our gifts is vital to our ministry in Christ's name because it makes the Holy Spirit visible in the world. However, Paul goes further than this in his response to the Corinthians.

As we know, you and I are stewards of God's good gifts. Every Christian is blessed with one or more gifts of the Spirit. What Paul wanted us all to understand and embrace is that no one gift or cluster of gifts is better or worse than another. All God's gifts are equally valuable in building up the community of faith. We do not have a choice in what gift or gifts we are blessed with – the source and decision is made by God the Holy Spirit. Paul also expounds on how each of our spiritual gifts are not just meant for personal or private edification, but are given for God's service in community. Hence, no one person has all the necessary gifts for the success of any community of faith. Yet, all gifts are valuable and

important to Christ's ministry. This is the unity in diversity that Paul will speak of at length in his first letter to the Corinthians verses the gift of speaking in tongues that is splintering the church and being misused for personal aggrandizement by a few members of that community. As one commentator puts it, "Christianity is not a religion of spiritual Lone Rangers or narcissists." The church on earth reflects the characteristics of God in heaven. Again, the Godhead is a picture of unity in diversity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit in perfect harmony. For you and me and all who consider themselves members of this parish, we are each members of Christ's body and when we are truly living in line with the Holy Spirit, according to God's will, we will always speak out and act in ways that are congruent with the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus.

This whole portion of the letter to the Corinthians invites us to consider the difference between what the world values as "gifted", and how all God's children are gifted. Let's all ponder this during the next week or so. When society talks of "gifted" people it reveals what society really values. Those considered most gifted by the world tend to have high IQs or a surprising talent in an intellectual field; those who are superb athletes; and those who are what we call gifted musicians or artists. Now there is nothing wrong with these wonderful gifts, but we have to ask how God desires these people to use their gifts in His service? In addition, what does it say about society and the de-valuing of the majority of people who have more modest gifts in these or other areas? Does cultural pressure and accolades for some set up a kind of unholy hierarchy that encourages prideful behavior in some by offering financial rewards and power, while discouraging and disempowering others, and leaving many with a fractured sense of worth? Paul was adamant that everyone has God-given gifts and that no person and no gifts are more or less valuable than any other; and that each gift is given so that we can give it back to God, glorifying God's name and building up the Body.

It is also true that specific communities have gifts that God also intends us to use for the good of the community. The gift of hospitality is one of those gifts here at The Church of Our Saviour, but not the only gift. God does and will bless our faithfulness. As we continue to grow, God will send us those with other gifts that complement our developing ministries or provide us with new opportunities to *practice God's graciousness*. We are constantly challenged to discern and use each of our gifts according to God's will, and to ask what each gift can and does mean to us in our journey with Christ. You and I, and all members of the Body are united in a shared confession of Jesus as Lord, yet we are also live out our faith in the midst of wonderful variety of Spiritual gifts. This diversity enriches us, makes us stronger and healthier, and more able to serve God and the world in Christ's name, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps we have not considered this before, but we are a part of God's ongoing dialogue with the world. May what we say in our words, our silence, and in our actions always speak of Christ's love, hope and life.

Amen.