

Strength through Diversity

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Recently on a British Airways flight Boston to London a middle-aged and apparently quite wealthy woman found herself sitting next to a Drag Queen. The Drag Queen had just finished a show and did not have time to change before having to catch her flight. As the passengers were filing in and taking their seats, she called a member of the cabin crew to ask about her seating. "What seems to be the matter, madam?" asked the attendant.

"Can't you see?" the woman responded. "You have assigned me a seat next to this man dressed as a woman. I cannot possibly sit next to this disgusting human being. Please find me another seat as soon as possible!"

The cabin attendant, hearing the words and observing the commotion that was clearly stirring among other passengers, commented, "Please calm down, madam. The flight is very full today, but I will do what I can. I will go and check on availability of seats in business or first classes."

Meanwhile the woman, with a scowl on her face, looked at the Drag Queen beside her, who was outraged, not to mention many of the surrounding passengers. A few minutes later the attendant returned with good news that she delivered to the woman, who continued to look at her fellow passengers with a smug and self-satisfied grin. The flight attendant told the woman, "Madame, unfortunately, as I suspected economy is full. I have spoken to the cabin services director and business class is also full. However, we do have one seat in first class."

Before the woman had a chance to answer, the flight attendant continued, "It is most extraordinary to make this kind of upgrade; I needed to receive special permission from the captain. But, given the circumstances, the captain felt that it was outrageous that someone be forced to sit next to such an obnoxious person." With that the flight attendant turned to the Drag Queen sitting next to the woman and said, "So if you would like to gather your things, madam, I have your seat ready for you." At that point, the surrounding passengers stood and gave a standing ovation as the Drag Queen in all her glory walked triumphantly into first class.

This event presents us with many lessons. Most obviously we learn of the reality of prejudice and intolerance in our world. The story also shows how one can learn a significant lesson from those with greater wisdom that such prejudicial attitudes do not gain us anything, but rather can shame us into realizing the callous nature of our attitudes. Somewhat hidden, but nonetheless present, the story also tells us of the great value diversity can bring, especially with the knowledge that all things have one source, namely God, and we are to work toward one common end, the building of God's kingdom. Although our methods will be different, we must use the gifts we possess, our varied cultures, racial ethnicities, gender identity, and sexual orientation to assist others toward the common goal of life eternal. Openness to what is new and different is key to appreciating the power, goodness, and strength that can come from diversity.

Paul addresses the issue of diversity in today's reading by describing the various gifts we have received, all of which have one common source, the Holy Spirit. First, Paul speaks of the necessity of the Spirit in our lives. We are not autonomous operators; God is here to inspire and encourage us. God does not force us to do anything, but the inspiration is given to lead us in the direction - the path that leads back to God. Thus, the Spirit is necessary to continue toward God. Living in the power and presence of God has its positive effects on us.

The apostle then enumerates the many gifts of the Spirit. Each is unique and special; each is given, Paul says, as the Spirit chooses. Each gift is different and must be used in a collective sense with others in building the kingdom of God. It is through this diversity of gifts that we find our source of sustenance. We need all the gifts, but none of us has them all. Thus, we need to appreciate the diversity, the differences, and the strength that we gain through sharing with one another. If all the world's people had the same gifts, human society would never achieve its potential. As Paul says, the manifestations of the Spirit's gifts are given for the common good.

We have all experienced the plethora of the Spirit's gifts, in our lives and the lives of those we know, and love. Some are given great wisdom; some are given significant knowledge. We know that these two gifts are very different, but both are necessary to build the kingdom.

Paul continues by describing many gifts, each given by the Spirit, each different and unique. These gifts, together with knowledge and wisdom, show the diversity of our talents. All are important; all are necessary. While we might live without one of the gifts in our personal lives, our world would be somewhat less without any of them. We would all be deprived of something very special.

We have all heard the expression "Diversity is the spice of life." I think we can all verify the reality of this statement. Picture a world where all people looked, spoke, acted, and thought alike. It would be like entering a shoe store and finding only one style or going to a car dealership that offered only one make or model of automobile or finding only one brand of cereal or bread in the grocery store. Simply put, life would be boring and certainly less than satisfying. Yet, as is evidenced by the story of the passenger on the plane and, too often unfortunately in the world around us, indeed in our own lives at times, we reject diversity.

Everyone makes choices; nobody likes everyone or everything. The rejection of diversity is not that we don't acknowledge differences in talents, ideas, ethnic backgrounds, gender identity and sexual orientation, or possess varied religious or political persuasions. Rather when we reject diversity, we openly reject that which is different around us. Most of the time, our rejection of diversity is rather subtle. We choose not to associate with certain people, either individuals or collective groups. There are times we never consider another person's idea, way of doing things, or attitude if it differs from ones we hold. We isolate ourselves from what we do not like or simply do not wish to deal with. Most probably we don't even realize that we are rejecting diversity. Rather, we say to ourselves, "I simply have different ideas than others."

Too often, however, society and individuals openly reject diversity, even in a hostile way. That was certainly the case with the woman on the plane. We may not make a scene as did the woman, but in our minds and actions we are as closed as she was toward the Drag Queen. Such attitudes stunt our growth. Sometimes we are fortunate, like the woman on the plane, to be shocked or even embarrassed into understanding the problematic reality of our attitude. However, too often we do not learn and thus we continue down the path that leads nowhere. We miss out on many opportunities in life.

The destructive force of a world without diversity has, unfortunately, been repeated too often in history. The suppression of native people in the Americas and the perceived need to have one and only one culture deprived the world of a few significant civilizations. Religious wars in Europe, the crusades of medieval times, were fought basically because people were not open to varied understandings of God. Such actions were an overt denial of Jesus' message of inclusivity. Rejection of the Jews as a race, culture, and religion led directly to the Holocaust. These historical events stunted the world's ability to grow for a time. We have seen the fight for Civil Rights for People of color in our nation and the continued oppression of the same people. We have seen the Stonewall riot and the struggle in the LGBTQ+ Community for equal rights in our society. When prejudice and bigotry rear's its ugly head and oppression of people continues, We are all the losers.

We need to root out the attitude of exclusivity, the idea that some people, ideas, opinions, and attitudes are acceptable while others are not. We may not agree with certain ways of doing things or the way others choose to live but we cannot dismiss them. Such behavior not only contradicts the message of Paul and his diversity of spiritual gifts for the common good, but it betrays the whole life of Jesus, the head and guide of our faith. Therefore, let us learn a lesson today of the need to appreciate variations in our world and to love all people, who were created in God's image. Let us truly believe that strength comes through diversity. As we continue to walk as one people, rejoicing in our different talents, gifts, ideas, diversity within our world. Let us do so in imitation of Jesus, our brother, friend, and Lord. Amen.