

Sermon 6-22-25

Keller Hawkins preaching

“Life comes into being out of community.”

“Life comes into being out of community, and wherever communities spring up which make life possible and further it, the divine Spirit is efficacious. Wherever community of life comes into being, there is also community with God’s life-giving Spirit. *The creation of community* is evidently the goal of God’s life-giving Spirit in the world of nature and human beings. All created beings exist in other beings, not out of themselves, and they are therefore dependent on one another,” (Moltmann, 219).

These are the words of Jurgen Moltmann from his book, *The Spirit of Life* — a text that enraptured me so much in divinity school, it inspired one of my tattoos. And it’s a text I lean heavily on for today’s sermon. And rightly so. Moltmann makes a crucial point: Spirit, community, and life are interwoven. We cannot truly have one without the others.

Paul, in our text today from 1 Corinthians 12, likens community with a body: “all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many.” And “we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body” — one community. And within community, there is diversity: glorious, beautiful diversity. Spiritual gifts are numerous. Paul here mentions wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, speaking in tongues, and interpretation—all given to the community by the Spirit.

First, let me just pause here to name my gratitude for Paul’s reminder to us today that diversity is indeed God-given, celebrated, and desired—amen? But Paul’s letter to the Corinthians is addressing a more specific problem: it seems that some gifts within the community were being seen as more valuable, more desired, more worthy than others. And Paul is quick to clarify: it is the Spirit who gives these gifts. And further, gifts are given for the collective good of all. In other words, gifts are meant to be shared for the flourishing of the community not for the boasting of specific individuals over others. We are all equally valued and differently gifted by the Spirit for the sake of the whole.

This was a radical concept then and remains one now. This community of life Paul is describing is one that denies hierarchies, empires, caste, and class. It is collaborative, not competitive, interdependent rather than individual. There’s no “pick yourself up by your bootstraps” messaging here or a gold card to buy your way in. All belong here, just as you are: uniquely beautiful, gifted, and beloved.

The Spirit does that: She makes room. In the Spirit, we are bound together; we belong to each other like we belong to God. When one of us is not free, we all aren’t free. When one of us suffers, we all suffer. When one is celebrated, all are celebrated. In a community of life in the Spirit, we cannot do anything in isolation; we need each other. Alone is a myth.

Moltmann wisely counsels us again: “The fellowship of the Holy Spirit [includes] both *the love* that binds and *the freedom* which allows everything to arrive at itself, in its own unique nature. ... Without freedom, love crushes the diversity of what is individual; without love, freedom destroys what is shared and binds us together. Community which serves life can therefore only be understood as integrating... creating unity in diversity, while at the same time

differentiating and making diversity in unity possible,” (220). *The love that binds and the freedom that allows...* I wonder what that would look like, feel like, sound like, taste like?

One answer: “Fellowship means opening ourselves for one another, giving one another a share in ourselves. It creates respect for one another... lives in reciprocal participation and from mutual recognition,” (220). Collaborative, not competitive; interdependent, not individual. This sounds to me like the kin-dom of God. Not in a far-away, never-to-be-realized theological dreamland, but something we can create here and now, something we catch glimpses of here and there.

I wrote this in my ordination paperwork: “Later in [our All-Church] retreat, more [kin-dom] moments like this occurred, the most poignant being during our annual Talent Show. Congregants of all ages shared their gifts and talents, from silly to serious. We had jokes and magic tricks, solos and duets, rehearsed choreography numbers and even a demonstration of Chinese jump-roping. But perhaps my favorite moment is when 4-year-old Elijah went to the mic to share his skill: roaring. And it’s exactly what it sounds like. As soon as the mic was lowered to his height, he grabbed it with both hands and confidently roared into the mic as if he was a wild animal. When he finished, the entire room gave him a standing ovation as he walked back to his parents’ arms with a gleeful smile. In these moments, we as a community are eager to support each other, just as we are. We are embodying God’s kingdom.”

Friends, when we are bound to one other, we are compelled to give standing ovations, to march in the streets, to give our time, our money, our prayers, to build bridges, tear down walls, plant flowers, seek peace, and invest in life-giving systems because we see that we are all connected. When we revere life, we must also renounce any violence toward life, in whatever form it presences itself: like bombs, war, deportations, or funding cuts for life-saving care. This is our call and our vow. Community is messy work — much of my life has taught me that. And it can break our hearts. But as Mother Teresa would say, maybe our hearts will break so completely that the whole world falls in.

Moltmann’s back. He writes: “The Spirit is God’s empathy, God’s feeling identification with what God loves,” (51). The Spirit weaves all of creation together. I am one with the wild poppies, the dewdrops, the sunbeams, the mountain laurel. I am also one with the pain of those who mourn, the suffering of those in Israel-Palestine, the fear of migrants in the US, the civilians caught in the crossfires, the exhaustion of a day-laborer. I am one with the birth of every child, the planting of every tree, the harvesting of every fruit. The water that flows in me is made possible by the breath of air I just took that once lived among the stars. The Spirit binds us, fills us, uses us for the good of all things — if we have the courage to allow it. The Spirit is as near to us as the breath we breathe, inspiring our faith and surrounding us on the journey with gifts that we may offer the world for the affirmation of Life.

And our gifts provide. When I think of community gifts, I think of Ruby’s smile, Anne’s tears when she prays, Elijah’s roar, Eric’s welcome, Jim’s servant heart, Sarah’s encouragement, Jerome’s “amen” from the balcony, Ingrid’s persistence, Paul’s wonder, Steve’s wisdom, Linda’s presence, Quinn’s leadership, Mozelle’s zest for life, Tucker’s joy, Amy’s generosity, Rick’s playfulness, Mike’s courage, Heather’s sincerity, Bill’s humor, Dayton’s confidence, those Henry brothers and that unparalleled harmony - the list could go on and on and on. Gifts abound here.

But let us not get short-sided or arrogant; indeed, that's what Paul was trying to address! Instead, may our giftedness open us up to the giftedness of the world around us, so we might have the courage to share our blessings and be blessed by all of creation for the building of the beloved community: one where we are all free and loved. I can't help but think of the concept of *ubuntu*, a Bantu word I was introduced to while in youth group here, a concept that means something like, "I am because we are." *Life comes into being through community*, does it not?

The work of community is never finished. But today, I must say: Belmont, I am honored to be a part of you. Thank you for sharing your gifts all these years, and thank you for helping me see some of mine. I am forever grateful for God's work through the Holy Spirit for landing me here in this beloved community to be nurtured and sent as a disciple of Christ. You live in me, and I, you. Thanks be to God.