

Activation Required

A Morning Message for Worship on MLK Weekend Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
January 17, 2016
Text: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Something extraordinary happened in our community this past week and it's still happening right here and right now. You can see it in the blue folks are wearing this morning as our own response to an extraordinary moment in time. A sick little boy and his family struggled to come to grips with the fact that this beautiful child's life would come to a very different end than what all had imagined when he was born eight short years ago. A courageous decision was made to live into the unthinkable reality of his death by putting all their energy into enjoying the time they had left together.

This little boy, Dorian Murray, had only one request – to be famous in China before he went to heaven. That simple request set off a chain of events which have raced around the world. Signs sporting the Twitter hashtag *#D-Strong* have come back to Dorian from across the globe – including China where Dorian's courage in the face of the unthinkable has proven inspirational in ways surprising even to calloused, cynical adults. Dorian's request has become so much more than a dying child's desire to be known before he dies. Dorian's request has, as his mother has already

figured out, become a movement which has brought out the best in people everywhere.

“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lay down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” Many of us heard these familiar words from Isaiah just a few weeks ago as they are part of our Scripture readings as we get ready for Christmas. They are words of prophecy describing what the world can become when we truly trust God’s promises that love is stronger than hate, that justice is for everyone, that peace doesn’t have to remain an elusive dream. And this week, in our own town, in our own experience, in a way we all have witnessed – these words came true as the answers to Dorian’s request flooded in from around the world. A little child has led us back to what matters – remembering that we all want and need to be known and valued for who we are. Dorian has reminded us that we all want to know that our being here on this earth has made a difference, that someone will care when we’re gone. Dorian has struck a nerve around the world because his question is our question – how does the fact that I have lived matter in the grand scheme of things? Who will know, who will care, that I have been here for however short a time?

This is the basic question of life we all face. Most of us spend a lifetime either trying to answer that question or running away from it because the answer, or potential lack thereof, scares the

heck out of us. It's an ancient question and one which undergirds the spiritual quests of all of the world's religions, not the least of which is our own – Christianity. Our text this morning contains part of the Apostle Paul's response to such existential wonderings about who we are in the grand scheme of things and why we matter. This 1st letter to the Corinthians is actually Paul's letter back to the people of that ancient church who had asked him to help them understand something which was upsetting them.

Paul is, in his answer to them, attempting to address a phenomenon that all churches experience at some point in their lives, in one way or another. It seems a group of people in the church had decided that they were better than others because they had received the spiritual gift of glossolalia – speaking in tongues. Also known as ecstatic utterance, glossolalia was thought to be the ability to speak the unique language of heaven. So, to folks hearing it, the utterances would often sound like gibberish. None the less, it became a singular benchmark in this ancient church as to who was especially favored by God and who was not. This is the question confronting Paul and our text this morning is his answer to that ancient church. It was a legitimate question! After all, who could possibly know whether or not these ecstatic utterances were truly from God or just someone swept up in the moment and babbling away of their own accord? And, as Paul reminds them, they already experienced being carried away when

they were involved in the worship of the Roman gods and idols before they had even heard of Jesus. Were they just transferring that religious practice to their new environment? They needed to be sure that's not what they were doing, Paul said. They needed to be careful to figure out, to determine for themselves, that what was happening in their community was from God and God alone.

To do that, Paul explains to them, first you must understand the true nature of spiritual gifts. First and foremost, there are varieties of these gifts, varieties of service to God and varieties of activities the community needs. This is because there are varieties of people. Paul is reminding them that any time you get a group of people together, you will automatically have a mixture of interests, skill sets and gifts. What matters is that all of these come from God and are activated by the Spirit for the common good. That's Paul's key point here so let me say it again. What matters with all these spiritual gifts, all these various interests and skill sets, all these different activities that people engage in within the church – all of them are activated by the Spirit of God for the common good. For the *common* good. Not for individual good so that you can feel proud that you have this spiritual gift or another. Not so that one person can feel like they're more important to God or the community because they do so much more than someone else. No, Paul says. This is not about individuals and what they think is happening, and how important they are in the midst of it.

What matters, Paul says, is God's activation – God's movement in the midst of the community – of all these things through the Spirit for the *common* good. In other words, the value of all these spiritual gifts is how they make a positive difference in everyone's lives, in how they advance the common good as everyone tries to live the life God has given them.

To make his point, Paul then reviews what he thinks those spiritual gifts are and the first two he names do have to do with speaking – utterance of wisdom and utterance of knowledge. Funny words to our ears so it's difficult to know what he means. What he's talking about as most vital of the spiritual gifts is the ability to speak, yes, but not in heavenly language. Instead what is most vital when it comes to the ability to speak is the ability to teach others in the Spirit about God and what it means to live as a person of faith. Paul then names faith as next on his list of spiritual gifts. By this he is referring to those folks we know whose faith stands as powerful and inspiring witness to us. They lead by example, showing us and telling us what it is to have faith.

Paul continues on naming a few more spiritual gifts – healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, and discernment of spirits. He finally comes to the spiritual gifts which are part of glossolalia – the gift which had caused all the uproar in the first place – speaking tongues and the interpretation of that speech. Paul's placement of tongues last on his list is quite intentional

since the folks who believed they had this gift were the ones who were looking down on everyone else. Paul is saying to them quite clearly and directly that these specific gifts, if they are even real, aren't any more important than any of these other gifts. And all of these gifts, Paul tells them and us, are provided to us by God for one reason – to promote the common good. And why is that? Paul's answer appears quite precisely in verse 12 – “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.” We are one body of the faithful in Christ, Paul is telling them. Any gifts you have God has given to you for the purpose of building up that one body. It's not about you, Paul is saying to them. It was never about you. It's about God and God's people and what God needs them to do with the gifts God has given them. It's about God's Spirit becoming activated inside each one of us in unique ways to build up the body of Christ so that we can change the world.

Spiritual gifts, gifts from God given to each of us as unique as we are and intended by God to build up the body of Christ so we can change the world. *What? Spiritual gifts? Not me.* I'm just me, plain old ordinary me. I am not extraordinary. I have no real gifts that might build up the body of Christ. Not me. How could that even be possible? That's a legitimate question we in the church are always asking of ourselves as individuals and the church as a whole. Finding the answers takes effort and

intentionality and faith that all this really does matter. Lucky for us we have so many reminders all around us that the answers are out there, and that our search for them matters. We have reminders from God everywhere that we matter and that God does love us beyond all reason. In turn this means we are capable of things more amazing, more seemingly impossible than we can ever imagine.

On this third weekend in January we celebrate reminders of this truth in the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was a man blessed with many spiritual gifts, probably most obvious among them what Paul would have named as utterances of wisdom and knowledge. We heard some of that in our call to worship this morning which was an excerpt from Dr. King's famous "I Have A Dream" speech. Everyone knows that speech. Maybe you've even heard a recording of it or read a transcript of it. What most folks don't know is that those are not the remarks Dr. King had planned on giving that day. The transcript of his written speech proves that. But, in that moment on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial at the height of the struggle for Civil Rights in this county with a million people standing there staring at him, Dr. King was overwhelmed by God's Spirit which he trusted enough to set aside his written remarks and spoke instead the words God put on his heart in that moment. And in that instant, the world changed forever.

So too has the world been changed forever by a little boy whose dying wish is to be known around the world before he meets God face to face. Dorian's story is the story of spiritual gifts made activated in our midst in the most surprising, most amazing and most unexpected way. He has demonstrated the gifts of wisdom and knowledge through his courage in facing his own mortality and his quest to be known just as he is. He has demonstrated the gift of faith in his conviction that all this happen before he goes to heaven. He has survived the gifts of healing the secular world has offered to replace them instead with the deep, soul healing only God can provide. He has worked miracles as his request bounced around the globe touching literally millions of people. Through all this we have witnessed God's prophecy, God's proclaiming of God's own truth alive and vibrant, calling forth God's Spirit across the globe from the most surprising places and unexpected people. And the gift of tongues is shining through in a simple, short phrase -- #D-Strong. Ecstatic proof that God's love shines through us all if only we will allow it to. And a little child shall lead them. Yes, Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.