Sermon **Isaiah 62.1-5**
January 20, 2019 **Psalm 36.5-10**
Epiphany 2C **I Corinthians 12.1-11**
The Rev. Gary R. Brower, PhD **John 2.1-11**

It will probably come as no surprise to many of you that I like the Apostle Paul. I really do! I know that there are some out there who are not fans. And there can be any number of reasons for this. Some may not like the fact that he didn't try to condemn slavery; indeed, in the letter to Philemon, he simply takes it for granted. Some may not like references in some of the letters attributed to Paul (like 1st and 2nd Timothy, and Titus — as well as others) that seem to be repressive to women. (We can talk about that after the service). All that aside, however, I really like Paul.

One of the main things I appreciate about Paul . . . and those who are participating in the discussions on Romans have heard me say this . . . is that Paul generally is dealing with real-life situations in his letters. From our vantage point, with some two thousand years of theological reflection ON those letters, we may forget that he was writing to real congregations of Christians. In most cases, those congregations were ones that he had founded. Those letters were written to address real problems, or answer real questions. What Paul was trying to do, in answering these issues, was to relate how he understood the issue in light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and what that implied.

The letter to Philemon, for example, was a personal letter to a friend regarding a runaway slave. Paul's correspondence with the church at Thessalonica dealt with the question of Jesus' second coming, and how people should live while waiting for it. He wrote the Galatians because a certain kind of "Christian" was telling the Gentile Christians that they had to become "Jewish" — that is, keep laws of kosher, be circumcised, etc., — before they could be Christians. And, the letters to the church at Corinth addressed a huge variety of issues and controversies about which Paul had been informed..

While there were many questions raised by the Corinthian Christians, one major issue was at the root: the question of social distinctions . . . that is, who was "better" or "more important" than the others. We miss a lot of this when we break the letter up into church-service-sized "bites", but a close reading makes it clear from the very first chapter. I don't want to go into great detail, but from the start, we read about controversies about who was the best person to follow: Paul, Apollos, or Jesus? We read about issues of dining-room decorum: who got to eat first? We read about issues of intellectual pride, that is, who was "wise" and who was "foolish". Clearly Paul got frustrated by this in-fighting.

We see that reflected in our selection from 1 Corinthians. We'd have to read a lot more of the letter to get the back story, but previous to today's passage, Paul had to address folks who were trying to put some "spiritual gifts" above others, such as the gift of prophecy or the gift of tongues. Some within the congregation were trying to create some sort of hierarchy in how the Spirit manifested itself in certain people. To be sure, the church at Corinth was not the only place having these discussions; the same issue comes up in other letters. . . . and in our time. But Paul is adamant here: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in

everyone" (12.4-6) . He puts "variety" and "same" in conversation, and discards the notion that there is a hierarchy: "Yes, there IS variety! But God created and places value on that variety!" He implies the further question, "How DARE you place one gift above another?"

Further into chapter twelve, Paul spells this out, using the familiar "body" metaphor:

> "Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose" (14-18).

Paul's argument here, as well as throughout Corinthians, is the the Christian congregation is a reflection of the body of Christ; it IS the Body of Christ. And, as such, every "member" of the congregation brings his or her specific spirituals gift to bear for the benefit of the entire body. And the power that binds the body together, as we know from that popular wedding passage, 1 Corinthians 13, is love."

Woven throughout this latter section of 1 Corinthians are several questions. First, of course, is "Can you Corinthians understand that there are a variety of gifts?" Second, "Can you understand how they all function for the mutual benefit of the body of Christ, which you are?" But, third—and implied: "Do you realize that God has gifted each of YOU, individually? Do you recognize your individual spiritual gift? And, if so, how will YOU manifest that as a member of the body of Christ?"

Into that body today, we [will bring/bring/brought] Alexander Urso. Those of us who are parents—or grandparents, aunts or uncles—can recognize, with Alexander's parents, the potentiality that is contained within that little person, and we can ask, with them: "What might he become? Will he be an athlete? An artist? A scientist? A skilled craftsman?" Equally important, however, especially in light of our lessons and the ceremony today, is "What might be his spiritual gift(s)? Might he become an encourager? Might he become a prophet? Might he have the gift of administration? Might he be a teacher?" The letters of Paul suggest that all of these are spiritual gifts . . . gifts that are essential for the life of the Body of Christ.

In the baptismal liturgy, we pray for the candidate. One of those prayers is that he be filled with God's "holy and life-giving Spirit". THIS is the bidding for the bestowal of spiritual gifts! Prior to those prayers, however, we re-participate in our own baptisms; we renew our baptismal covenant. We repeat promises we made, or that were made on our behalf — promises that suggest that WE discern and employ our spiritual gifts to "proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ", to "seek and serve Christ in all persons" — yes. But also, to "continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship", that is to be a part of the Body of Christ that is a congregation — through thick and thin.

These prayers are prayers of, and for, abundance. Paul exhorts the Corinthian Christians to see that ALL of the gifts, talents, and skills that individuals possess are present for use in the congregation. Those who lead the congregation are to recognize that fact, and not, because of their position, "lord it over the others", but simply to know that leadership is one of their gifts, one among many. But, equally, those in the congregation must realize that their gifts and skills are equally useful for the building up of the body of Christ. As Paul writes the Corinthians in a subsequent letter, "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of

the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (2 Cor 4.6-7). This "treasure in clay jars" that "shines in our hearts" is the Spirit manifested abundantly through our gifts, both within the Church and to the world.

"Clay jars" manifesting abundantly is what we heard about in our reading from John's Gospel. As with Paul's writing to the Corinthians, Jesus addressed a real-life situation at the wedding feast. Those large jars, having fulfilled their earthly purpose at the celebration in Cana — that is, providing water for purification rites — Jesus puts them to a different use. The water he changes to wine serves the wedding guests, making them glad, making the wedding feast amazing! What Jesus' mother (and perhaps others) saw as a situation of scarcity, Jesus saw as potentiality — as a source of abundance. This potentiality is what Jesus sees in Alexander; it is what Jesus sees in all of us.

We are clay jars, potentially full of abundant new wine, all of us who are baptized. All of us who are baptized, so our catechism reminds us, are "to come together week by week for corporate worship, and to work, pray and give for the spread of the kingdom of God" (p. 856)— that is, to bring to bear that abundant new life, those wonderful spiritual gifts in ALL their variety, for the service of God and the Church. This reminder—these lessons—can't come at a more opportune, and critical, time for us. We are facing challenges: we are embarking on a "Season of Discovery" as part of the Priest-in-Charge process; we will be challenged to evaluate our collective spiritual gifts and whether they do, or don't, equip us for ministry in the years to come in this place. We are facing significant budgetary issues this-coming year. What spiritual gifts are sprinkled throughout this congregation that will help us weather this storm? We are challenged by the changing demographics of the neighborhoods around us. What un-recognized, or under-developed, gifts are hidden in the clay jars of our new members and children?

These are challenges, yes. But, look around you at your fellow worshippers. When, in a few minutes, we "Pass the Peace", take a moment to look into the eyes of the person you hug, or with whom you shake hands, and ask, "How do I employ MY spiritual gift on THEIR behalf?" And "I wonder what is THEIR spiritual gift, and how can I encourage, and give them a place, and freedom, to employ it?" This can make real the potentiality that God sees in us!

I want to close with the last verse of Hymn 528, "Lord, you gave the Great Commission", by Jeffrey Rowthorn:

Lord, You bless with words assuring:
"I am with you to the end."
Faith and hope and love restoring,
May we serve as You intend
And, amid the cares that claim us,
Hold in mind eternity.
With the Spirit's gifts empower us
For the work of ministry.

Amen.