

"Abundant Love"
(1 Cor 12:1-11)
January 16, 2022

Paul, as we know, was from a devout Jewish family based in the city of Tarsus, one of the larger centers of trade on the Mediterranean coast. He considered himself as having a legitimate birth, circumcised on the eighth day, an Israelite from an elite tribe, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, observed the law according to the strict piety of the Pharisees, a passionate defender of the purity of his religion, even to the point of persecuting the Church. (Phil 3:5-6) He hated the church people so much that he went to the Chief Priest and got arrest warrants to arrest the Christians in Damascus and bring them to Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1-2) Of course, he changed his position completely after having a vision of the ascended Jesus. And then he completed his first missionary journey with Barnabas, who helped him after his conversion. They went from Antioch to Cyprus, then to southern Asia Minor, and finally returned to Antioch. In his second missionary journey, the distance he traveled was much longer. He started from Jerusalem in late Autumn 49 CE, and he arrived Corinth about a year later. He spent about 18 months there and founded a church. The First Letter to the Corinthians is a letter from Paul to the Corinthian Church after he left. He wrote this letter to the Christians he knew because something went wrong. He wanted to give them warnings and advice.

"You were pagans." That was a warning to the Corinthian Church since it was a community of mixed characters. There were Gentile converts and Jews; slaves, people who were wise, powerful, and even of noble birth. Men and women were fully involved in church life. Anyone might pray aloud, speak tongues,

prophecy, and act ecstatically in worship. They started to compete against each other. Some claimed to be Paul's disciples, while some Apollos'. Was Paul a better master than Apollos, or the opposite? Shouldn't Jesus Christ be the only foundation of the Church and God as the one who makes things grow? A glance at the map will show that Corinth was made for greatness. All traffic between Athens, the north of Greece, and Sparta in the south had to be routed through Corinth. Most of the east to west traffic of the Mediterranean passed through Corinth too, by dragging their ships across the narrow land bridge about 4 miles wide or only their cargoes, if the ships didn't want to make a lengthier journey, travel around Cape Malea, the most dangerous cape even for experienced sailors. Because of its location, objects of luxury from everywhere found their ways into Corinth that made it a rich and populous city with one of the most significant commercial trades in the ancient world. Just look at the reconstructed theatre there, the city itself . They were gorgeous even according to our modern standards! Also, don't forget. The temple of Aphrodite was just up the hill nearby, with the statue of the goddess of love and one thousand priestesses attached to it. They were sacred prostitutes who would come down every evening to the streets of Corinth.

Being pagans, the above mentioned was a part of their culture. It could be an advantage to them because of the exposure. However, what if they couldn't master their talents and experiences? Paul was deeply rooted in the Jewish culture, which contained many good elements. However, since it's so apparent that anyone who hangs on a tree is cursed by God (Deut 21:22-23) according to this tradition, Jesus could not be an exception, which drove Paul to take extreme actions against Jesus's followers. He was there at the stoning of Stephen. He

wanted to become better even though he had to hurt someone. So, did Paul attempt to hurt the pagans who worshiped other gods? No, he didn't. The harmful experience started with those who had an affinity to his culture, who might visit the Jerusalem temple, could be found in synagogues, or struggled to know and assimilate into Jewish culture.

Now, Paul warned the Corinthians Christians that they were like infants in Christ (1 Cor 3:1) because what happened to him before happened among them now. They let their talents and experiences work against them.

Gifts like speaking, praying, teaching, and writing are not the only gifts from God. The mason, carpenter, painter, fisherman, and even slave all have their unique gifts from God. Why should one be rated higher than the other? When you see someone unhappy, and a person says, "Are you okay?" the empathy and the word of love expressed are the gifts of God. It has nothing to do with the person's intellectual level or social status. The person was not even the owner of the gifts. They are something given to serve and build relations. The activities within the group, if they aren't self-serving, one can safely consider them as initiated from the same Holy Spirit. "Are you okay?" "You" could be anyone, could even be the Church. If you care, show it and let the God-given gifts in you be there.

You might hesitate, though, since you don't feel you have enough wisdom, nor knowledge, or faith. Do you think having them is always helpful? The serpent in the Garden of Eden was clever (Gen 3:1), the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden was promising in giving the Woman wisdom (Gen 3:6). Would you worry about not having that kind of wisdom? The people in Shinar knew how to build the tower of Babel. (Gen 11:1-9) The Magi knew how to read the meaning of the star. (Matt 2:1-2) Astronomers can explain the origin and evolution of celestial

objects. They even propose theories about understanding our universe based on mathematics and natural sciences. Are we missing these know-hows? Or are we puzzled for not having the faith of the great persons like Abraham, who was willing to offer his only son as a sacrifice, or simply a faith that can move mountains? (Matt 17:20) We have reasons to hesitate since they could come from sources other than the Holy Spirit. Only if they are for building up one another, turning visions into actions, we might safely consider them as coming from the Holy Spirit.

What about healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues, and the interpretation of tongues? These lead us into the battles between science and pseudo-science, history and futurology, psychology and parapsychology, just to name a few. We might not share the same opinions on all of them. However, we have to acknowledge that Jesus didn't want to use his healing power and miracles to make disciples. Instead, he did whatever he could to channel the love of God to the people he met.

The love of God is abundant, so abundant that we can describe it as filled to the brim and overflowing. It shows in the gifts people received. The Holy Spirit leads us to manage them so that they don't have to be hierarchical or divisive. We shouldn't put one above the other or below. "Are you okay?" might be better than a sermon. Your presence is as essential as having the management skill for running an organization.

Storytime:

Once upon a time, a person said to the master, "May I become your disciple?" Then the master said, "Keep your eyes closed, and then you are my disciple. But I shall teach you how to open them wide." "What do you mean?" said the person. "The day you open

your eye, you will see there's nothing you can learn from me or anyone." "What then is a master for?" said the person. "To make you see the uselessness of having one."

The Corinthians forgot that they didn't possess the spiritual gifts that held the loving community together. They are all from God. Are we doing the same? Jesus transformed water into wine at the wedding in Cana. The wine was a gift of God. Does it make sense if the host keeps the fine wines instead of giving them to the guests? We believe that resources are sufficient. We believe that resources shouldn't be in the hands of a small fraction of the population. We believe that resources must be used to hold communities and the world together. Let the Holy Spirit work on us, move us so that we dare to live with an abundant spirit that stands in contrast to many of the world's realities. Amen.