

First Baptist Church, Vancouver

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Text: 1 Corinthians 12

Title: "Living A Miracle: Participating in the Creativity of the Trinity"

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What a great text!

Can you feel the vibrancy, the creativity, the energy... pulsating through the words?

If I were to give a title to what the Apostle Paul is developing in 1Corinthians 12, it would be "Living a Miracle." The Church of Jesus Christ, in the heart of the Center of the world, is "Living a Miracle."

"Miracle." A loaded word, to be sure. But I've not yet found a word that better captures the pulse of the text. Living in British Columbia, I thought about using the word "super-natural", or "super-naturalized". But that would require even more explaining and nuancing! "Miracle". Every human being who confesses Jesus as Lord... and every congregation centered in Jesus as Lord... is "living a miracle".

The word miracle means, "an event or entity that is not the result or product of mere human effort." A "miracle" is "an event or entity that can only finally be accounted for on the basis of Divine effort." The word "miracle" says that more than human intention and action are involved. Indeed, the word "miracle" says that without this "more than human intention and action" the event or entity would not happen.

In 1Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul is telling us that to be part of the life and ministry of the Church of Jesus Christ is to participate in a miracle.

Really? Really!

Paul begins "now about the gifts of the Spirit", or "now concerning the spiritual gifts" (12:1). This is not the first time Paul has used the phrase in his letter to the church in the first century city of Corinth. He has used in reference to many other issues he has been asked by the Corinthians to address. Issues like: groups of people forming around their favorite teachers, people buying into subtleties of so called "human wisdom," people misunderstanding the nature and exercise of power, distorted understandings of human sexuality, God's plan for marriage, food sacrificed to idols, who should pray and prophesy in public. Then the major occasion for the letter: "now concerning spiritual gifts."

New Testament scholar Tom Gillespie argues that the phrase should be translated, "now concerning spiritual persons". The issue is not so much "gifts" as "gifted persons." The problem at Corinth is not a false understanding of spiritual gifts... but a false understanding of what it means to be a "spiritual person."

And Paul deals with the problem by taking to the church back to fundamentals -- always a good move! Paul reminds the Corinthians -- and us -- that the Church of Jesus Christ is "a

miracle": a reality that can be accounted for on no other basis; a reality that can operate on no other basis.

So, let us explore the miracle in some depth.

We are "living a miracle" in three ways.

1) First, at the heart of the Christian faith is the confession "Jesus is Lord". Verse 3: "Therefore I make known to you, that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus is accursed'; and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord', except by the Holy Spirit."

"Jesus is Lord". A world-transforming affirmation! "Jesus is Kyrios", is literally how Paul puts it. Kyrios. It is, as Paul says: the great Christological hymn of Philippians 2, "the name above every name." There is no higher, no greater, no more exalted name than "Kyrios", "Lord".

Why? Because, as I've pointed out in other sermons, in the Roman world "Kyrios" meant "Sovereign One", or better yet, "Sovereign of Sovereigns": the final ultimate authority above all other authorities. Roman citizens -- like those in Corinth -- were to express their patriotism... by saying, "Kysar Kyrios", "Caesar is Lord." Citizens could believe anything else they wanted to -- they could believe in any other god or gods -- as long as they declared "Caesar is Kyrios."

In the Jewish world the name meant even more!! When strict Jews were reading their Bibles out loud, and came across the sacred name of God, the name "Yahweh", they would not pronounce it, out of fear of breaking the third Commandment, "Do not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain." So they would pronounce a substitute title, "Adonai", which means "my Lord". And which was translated into Greek as "Kyrios". In the Jewish world there is only one "Kyrios" -- Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob!

"Jesus is Kyrios!" A hugely audacious claim -- Jesus, not Caesar, is Sovereign of Sovereigns. Jesus, not Caesar is the true emperor. Jesus, not Caesar, has the last word. Caesar must one day answer to Jesus see how he ran the Roman Empire! And Jesus is God! Yikes! Jesus is worthy of the same worship given to Yahweh, the God of the Jews. He is Yahweh in our flesh. World-shaking... in the first century... and in the 21st century!

And believing that affirmation is a miracle! A divine work of the Spirit of the living God; a gracious work of the third person of the Holy Trinity.

Oh yes, we take it all, the data about Jesus... and we make a decision in light of that data. But in the final analysis, it is the Spirit who works this conviction.

How? I am not sure. Through the texts of Scripture, through expository preaching, through the community of faith, through dialogue with friends. But in the final analysis, coming to this hugely audacious affirmation conviction is a super-natural work.

The man from Galilee? The man who befriends sinners? Who frees captives, who heals broken bodies and troubled minds? Who mans broken hearts?... *That* man is Kyrios? The man who got crucified on a Roman cross, is now Sovereign over Sovereign?... and worthy the same adoration the Jews give to Yahweh?

It is the bedrock conviction of the church. Without this conviction, the church is not the church. It may be a nice social gathering, a place to belong and serve. But it is not the church.

"Jesus is Lord." And believing this is always a miracle. Praise God... it is happening all over this so-called "secular" city ... all over this so-called "secular" nation. In this room. Across the street. Over on Georgia Street. On 10th Ave. All over our city, people of all ages, of all races, of all cultures, of all social station, are confessing "Jesus is Lord". A miracle!

2) The second way in which the Church of Jesus Christ is "living a miracle": when we confess "Jesus is Kyrios", we are drawn into a whole new reality. We are drawn into Jesus' relationship with the One he calls "Father"... and drawn into Jesus' relationship with the One he calls "Spirit". That is, when we confess "Jesus is Lord" we are drawn into the relational dynamic in which He himself lives.... we are drawn into the Holy Trinity. When we confess, "Jesus is Lord" we are drawn into the very life of the Triune Lord!

Although Paul does not use the word "Trinity" in the text, he is describing Trinitarian reality throughout the text. God, Jesus, Spirit; God, Lord, Holy Spirit.

Verses 4-6: "Now there are different kinds of gifts, but the same spirit. And there are different kinds of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are different kinds of workings, but the same God."

When we confess Jesus as Lord, we are drawn to him... and to every one else who confesses him. Together we become his Body in the world!!!

But it is better than that! One we confess Jesus as Lord, we are drawn to Jesus and then into Jesus' status with His Father... and into Jesus' life in the Spirit. We are granted the miracle of participating in the shared life of the Trinity! Mercy!

The living God is not a solitary God. The living God is not lonely... or needy. Never has been... and never will be. The living God has always existed in community as community, in fellowship as fellowship, in relationship, as relationship. The living God has always been able to use the pronouns "we" and "us". This community, this fellowship, this relationship existed long before we humans came on the scene.

And here is the wonder of it all! It is out of this community, fellowship, relationship that we were created! Even more! It is *for* this community, fellowship, relationship that we were created... **and one being redeemed**. We were created by the triune God to share in the life the triune God shares!

One by the spirit of God, we confess the son of God to be "Lord", Kyrios, the Spirit of God draws us into the Son's relationship with His Father and into the Son's living experience of the Spirit. Thank you Lord!

And that is why the Church of Jesus Christ is "living a miracle" we are by grace participating in the very life and ministry of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It is from this glorious perspective that we come to understand "spiritual gifts." "Spiritual gifts" are not just some ability to minister placed upon us "from outside," so to speak. "Spiritual gifts" are abilities to minister in which we participate; the Triune God's abilities to minister... in which we participate. When the Spirit of God enables us to confess the Son of God as "Lord", the Spirit of God draws us into Jesus' life and ministry. As the Spirit rested upon, dwelt in, and animated Jesus' earthly life and ministry, so the Spirit rests upon, dwells in, and animates us in Jesus... to participate with Jesus in His ongoing ministry in and for the world.

We are living a living miracle!

The words Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 12 describe the various aspects of Jesus' spirit-empowered ministry. Verses 8-10: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healings, effecting miracles, prophecy, distinguishing of spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues... works of insight and restoration; works of communication and liberation.

And we -- mere mortals... and sinful mere mortals at that! Are drawn into these works to participate with the Triune God working those works in the world!

"To one be given a word of wisdom." I take it to be the ability to give guidance in the confusing and complex situations. "To another is given a word of knowledge." I take it to be the ability to give insight into a confusing or complex situation, "insight" that simply cannot be "figured out" or "deduced". "To another faith." The ability to believe God, to actively trust God in confusing and complex situations. "To another gifts of healings." Plural. Gifts. Healings. The ability to bring the "Kingdom-healing" work of Jesus to bear in the world. The ability to bring restoration and reconciliation. "To another effectings of miracles." Again, plural. Effecting. Miracles. The ability to help others in ways that exceed the human resources available in the circumstances, the ability to "find a way when there seems to be no way."

"To another prophecy." I take it to be the ability to speak into the circumstances with a penetrating word from God, the ability to say just the right word to build people up in faith and obedience. "To another the distinguishing of spirits." The ability to distinguish truth from error, the ability to see through deceit and manipulation, to recognize the moving of the Spirit of God, and to distinguish it from the subtle moving of the enemy of Jesus. "To another various kinds of tongues... and to another the interpretation of tongues." I take it to be the ability to communicate with the living God in words other than those of one's own language. It is not a rational speech; rather it is pre-rational, or para-rational communication. Deeply personal communion which cannot be adequately articulated in one's own words.

All of these "workings" descriptive of the inexhaustible creativity of the Trinity!!

And Paul's list in 1 Corinthians 12 is not an exhaustive. He spoke of other giftings in Ephesians 4 and Romans 12. We even find this "living a miracle" in the Old Testament, especially in the book of Exodus. After God had called his people out of Egypt, leading them to the promised land, he wanted them to build a sanctuary where he could come and meet with them. So we read Exodus 31 about a man named Bezalel. Exodus 31:2-3 "See, I've called by name Bezalel... and I have filled him with the Spirit of God in wisdom, in knowledge, and in all kinds of craftsmanship." And the list goes on to describe how the Spirit gave Bezalel the ability to work with wood and cloth and metals and dye to create the exquisite beautiful place where the Holy God chose to dwell. (See also 35:30-31; 36:1.) As the Spirit has done for Klara Van de Molen in giving her the skill to craft these banners. As the Spirit has done for other artists in this room. And for musicians. And carpenters. And engineers. And administrators.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12, everyone who confesses Jesus as Lord participates in one or more of the workings of the Trinity. Verse 7: "To each one be given the manifestations of the Spirit." To each disciple of Jesus be given some out-working of the creativity of the Trinity.

So Eugene Peterson paraphrases Paul this way: "Each person is given something to do that shows who God is." Peterson adds: "Everyone gets in it, everyone benefits."

And says Paul, no one lives the spiritual gifting alone. All the gifts have to work in concert with all the others. Makes sense, given that the father, the son, and Holy Spirit do not work alone.

"The I cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you" (12:21). No gifting, no spiritual person functions alone. We are in this... in this living miracle... together.

How do we know our place, our role? We will address that more fully this evening as we look at Romans 12. For now, I think we discover our place in the "living miracle" by asking and answering two questions. Number 1: What in your mind is the world's greatest need? Each of us is going to answer that differently. Of all the needs before us today, which do you think is the greatest? Number 2: What is your greatest joy? When you are doing "that," do you feel most alive, most yourself, most "at home"? Frederick Buechner has rightly said: God's call on my life is found at the intersection of the world's greatest need and my greatest joy.

Any and every ministry in the name of Jesus Christ is a "living miracle." Yes, fully human -- and with all our brokenness involved! But also fully divine. Emerging out of sharing life with and in the triune God.

3) The third way the Church of Jesus Christ is a "living miracle": it is all orchestrated by the Living God. Not only does God empower it all... God directs it all.

Take note of Paul's verbs in 1 Corinthians 12: "give", "distribute", "compose", "appoint". Verses 7-10 -- "To one is given by the one Spirit". Verse 11 -- "distributing to each one individually just as he wills." Verse 24 -- "God has so composed the body..." Verse 28 -- "God has appointed" or "set". Some as apostles, some as prophets, etc.

This is how the living God lead the congregation: God assembles a particular mix of people,... gifted in particular ways... to serve the particular needs... of a particular city.... The particular ministry of a particular congregation is, therefore, a function of the particular "spiritual persons" the Spirit has drawn into fellowship. Our "mission statement" if you will, is written on the shared life of the disciples whom the Spirit has pulled together in this place.

The Church of Jesus Christ is always more than the sum of its members and leaders. Because the Church always participates in more than the sum of its members and leaders. The church participates in the life and ministry of a living, triune God.

Vibrancy. Creativity. Energy. Eagerness to serve. The marks of those who confess "Jesus as Lord", and who join him in the shared life of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A miracle. A living miracle. We are living a miracle!!

Let us pray. Bless you! Make it so! For sake of the cities where you have placed us. And for the sake of your name.