

There were problems at the church in Corinth.

Corinth was a major center of trade, a large, prosperous and cosmopolitan city, and home to a range of religious and philosophical movements. It was in this environment that Paul brought the gospel of Jesus Christ and started a church for followers of Jesus.

At the time Paul had cause to write this letter, the congregation was riddled with problems. Members were at each other's throats, claiming spiritual superiority over one another which they tried to establish through ecstatic acts during worship. One-upmanship was the order of the day, both within the church and even outside at some members took others to court. Additionally, their personal conduct was questionable. In their community meals, some were gorging themselves while those who came late had nothing to eat. Some men were frequenting prostitutes and didn't see it as a problem, and one of them was even sleeping with his own stepmother.

Paul addresses the letter to the saints who are in Corinth, and as one of my books says, "one wonders what the Corinthian sinners looked like."

The particular issue addressed in the portion of the letter from our readings today related to their worship practices and to the idea that they thought some gifts were greater indicators of spiritual superiority and a connection with Christ. And they were using the exercise of those gifts to advance either their own cause or that of their groups.

And the problems at the church in Corinth are not so very different from the problems that we see in our churches today. A group thinks that it has the right answers,

whether that's about church governance, worship practices, individual behavior or what it takes to be saved. A group believes that somehow it has better access to knowing the truth of Jesus Christ. A group believes it has a better understanding of the Bible, what it says and how it should guide our lives. Or a group believes they know best how to be appropriately faithful.

Many of us have been on the receiving end of someone's assurance they had the truth at some point in our lives. Maybe someone told us that we weren't saved, or that we don't understand the bible correctly, or that the way we worship is somehow wrong.

Maybe, though, we've been on the giving end of these kind of critiques—so sure that our way of doing things is right that the different way others do it must be wrong. So sure that our understanding of God's truth in Jesus Christ is right that there must be serious flaws in the different way others understand Jesus. So sure that our worship practice is the most faithful that others must be getting it wrong, leaving out key parts, skipping over elements that must be done.

The truth of the matter is that we have probably all been on either side of the "I'm right, you're wrong" equation at many times in our lives. I believe that we get in the "I'm right," mindset when we get wound up with ourselves, who we are, what we do and what our lives are all about. Wound up with ourselves, it's harder to understand the perspective of someone else, it's hard to see that it would be possible to come at a situation from a different perspective, it's harder to imagine that another way of being or believing is as appropriate as our way.

Paul gets right to that in our 2nd reading today. He says to the Corinthians, "...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.” And then the heart of the matter, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

Not for each individual person’s good, not for each individual person’s salvation, not for each individual person’s best worship experience, not for each individual person’s relationship with God in Jesus.

No, for the common good. So that all can share in a common good, so that all can share in the promise of salvation, so that all can share together in communal worship that strengthens each, so that all can share together in the love of God in Jesus Christ.

And all of this is by the power of the Spirit who has given us each special and unique gifts through which we can together experience, claim and proclaim God’s kingdom.

Another way of understanding the unique, special work of the Spirit for each of us that strengthens the community for the common good is to look at our 1st reading and our gospel text together.

If you were paying careful attention during the reading of these texts, you may have noticed the giving of the Spirit in two very distinct, very different ways.

In John’s gospel Jesus comes into the locked upper room where the disciples are hiding out. He greets them with words of peace and shows them his wounds. He greets them again and says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Then he breathes on them and says “Receive the Holy Spirit.” In that quiet, enclosed upper room, Jesus breathes and the Holy Spirit comes upon the people gathered there. You can sense the

quiet joy. You can feel the power. You can imagine those disciples feeling less afraid, more confident, more assured.

The scene in Acts is quite different. In Acts, the Holy Spirit comes with a rush of violent wind—inside the house, tongues of fire—again, inside the house and a cacophony of languages. Then there is a crowd of festival celebrants that comes rushing to see this dramatic and exciting event and each one can hear them speaking in his or her own language.

Jesus' gentle breath, or wind, fire and clamorous voices. Two very different experiences of the Spirit. So is this just another frustrating example of places where the Bible tells us two different stories, or does it, perhaps, tell us something about our own experience with the Spirit? Does it show that as people who are different we experience the Spirit differently—and does it help us understand that not everyone's experience will happen in the same way—at the same time? Not everyone's experience is our experience.

I want to share two stories of coming to faith by two gifted but very different authors. The first is CS Lewis as described in his autobiography, "Surprised by Joy."

"I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out. Or if you like, that I was wearing some stiff clothing, like corsets, or even a suit of armor, as if I were a lobster. I felt myself being, there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut; I could unbuckle the armor or keep it on. Neither choice was presented as a duty; no threat or promise was attached to either, though I knew that to open the door or to take off the corslet meant the incalculable. The choice appeared to be momentous but it was also strangely unemotional. I say, 'I chose,' yet it did not really seem possible to do the opposite."

Then he describes how it was when he was ultimately brought to faith:

“You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all of England.”

Then Anne Lamott in her book of essays, “Traveling Mercies.”

“My coming to faith did not start with a leap but rather a series of staggers from what seemed like one safe place to another. Like lily pads, round and green, these places summoned and then held me up while I grew. Each prepared me for the next leaf on which I would land and in this way I moved across the swamp of doubt and fear.

She describes the point at which Jesus comes into her life like a cat that is following her around. And what she says of cats is, “you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left.” But then she finally gives in and writes, “I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, “Darn it: I quit.” I took a long deep breath and said out loud, “All right. You can come in.”

My own experience has been very different. For me, my faith in God has been like a deep, deep well inside of me—and it’s a well that has always been there. My questions, my doubt, my skepticism are like ground squirrels scratching around on the surface. Sometimes, though, the well is so deep, I don’t feel like I even have access to it.

And that's sometimes been a problem when I need it. If I stick with this metaphor, maybe what I need is to keep asking Jesus to draw water for me, to bring the deepness of the well to the surface, so I can drink of it.

Whatever your experience is, you can be sure that the people around you have had different ones, and that means the way they face life, the way they worship, the way they express themselves about God is going to be different from yours—just as the gifts we have been given by the Spirit are different. But the last word is that we are one in Christ and together we share our gifts, our understanding of our faith and our own stories for the sake of the common good, for the strengthening of the body and so that all may be blessed as we have been blessed.