“Once there was a tree and she loved a little boy. And every day the boy would come and he would gather her leaves and make them into crowns and play king of the forest. He would climb up her trunk and swing from her branches and eat apples. And they would play hide-and-go-seek. And when he was tired, he would sleep in her shade. And the boy loved the tree very much. And the tree was happy...”

Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree* is likely a book we all know. Most people read it as a story to share the gifts you’ve been given. On the surface, this story is good. Serve others wholeheartedly and share your gifts whatever they are, because they are needed.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul is telling his readers that their gifts, whatever they are, are needed. No one gift is better than another, all gifts are given through the Holy Spirit and activated by God for the common good. Paul had some reason to be concerned about the church in Corinth. They had begun assigning value and importance to various gifts.

The Corinthians were dividing themselves on a socioeconomic basis. Those in the congregation who had ample material resources were dividing themselves from those who did not. If you had plenty of money then surely the Spirit favored you over and above those without. In the previous chapter, Paul chastises the church in Corinth for abusing the Lord’s Supper. Those who were hungry and in need were not getting to partake. They were denied Christ’s table and humiliated. “What do you want me to say to you? Do you want me to commend you for this abuse? I don’t.” Paul says in his letter.

Paul sees a clear need to take the Corinthians back to the basics, because it seems that they have forgotten that they are all one in the Spirit. They seem to have forgotten that the church and the world need all of them whoever they are and whatever their gifts.

---

1 *The Giving Tree*, Shel Silverstein
may be. While they are many in members, they are all one body, and that one body needs every body.

In my second year of divinity school, I served a church for the duration of the academic year. My primary responsibility was to provide pastoral care and leadership to a Wednesday evening program for adults with developmental disabilities called the Sonshine Class. Each Wednesday consisted of dinner, a craft, Bible study, and music. Once a month, however, the group partook in communion and it often fell to the intern to preside at the table. Typically, the volunteers from the church served communion, but I wanted members of the class to be the ones who served. So, I approached four members of the class—Terry, Stephanie, Dana, and Charles—to ask if they would be willing to serve communion.

They were willing. And as they served communion, something really special happened. As Terry tore the bread and handed it to each person in the room, he did not say, “This is the body of Christ for you,” instead he said, “That’s you.” You see, what Terry knew and what he told everyone when he handed them the bread, was that they were members of Christ’s body. No matter who they were, what gifts they had or didn’t have, though there were many people in the room, all had confessed “Jesus is Lord” through the Holy Spirit, and had been baptized into the one body. “That’s you,” Terry said. “That’s you.”

Today is Pentecost. We celebrate the birth of the Church and we remember the Spirit, the breath of God being “poured out onto all flesh.” And it strikes me as painfully ironic that on this week of all weeks, when God’s very breath was poured out, a man’s breath was taken from him. George Floyd, a black man, a child of God made in God’s image, a member of the one body, struggled and pleaded, “I can’t breathe,” as a police officer used excessive and unnecessary violence against him.

I don’t need to tell you that we are currently living through a pandemic, but the reality is that there are currently two pandemics. One of those pandemics has been around far longer than COVID-19. This is a pandemic of racism and violence against black and brown bodies, and it continues to claim lives.
In 2014, another black man, Eric Garner, was killed by police. Eric Garner, like George Floyd, also struggled and pleaded, “I can’t breathe.” In response to Garner’s murder, poet Ross Gay penned, “A Small Needful Fact.” It goes like this:

“A small needful fact
Is that Eric Garner worked
for some time for the Parks and Rec.
Horticultural Department,
which means,
perhaps, that with his very large hands,
perhaps, in all likelihood,
he put gently into the earth
some plants which, most likely,
some of them, in all likelihood,
continue to grow, continue
to do what such plants do,
like house
and feed small and necessary creatures,
like being pleasant to touch and smell,
like converting sunlight into food, like making it easier for us to breathe.”

On Pentecost, the breath of God is poured out onto all flesh and the Church is born. The Spirit obliterates all divisions in the Church, not by making a uniformed set of believers who all are of one race or gender or age or sexuality, but by celebrating the diversity of race, ethnicity, age, gender and sexuality. One body with many members, no one member better than another. Each member made in the image of God and a beloved child of God. And when we as the church are silent when a beloved child of God made in God’s image is murdered, when we don’t actively engage in anti-racist work, when we don’t decry the systems of racism and oppression that are killing black and brown bodies, when we don’t work to educate ourselves on race, privilege, and white supremacy, and when we don’t celebrate a diversity of race, ethnicity, gender, age and sexuality, we are not the church of Pentecost. And we are not the church of Jesus Christ. To be one body, we need every body.

At the very beginning of our passage today, Paul writes, “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit. In our context and understanding, this is what we confess before we are plunged into the baptismal waters. The baptizer asks the baptizee “What is your
confession of faith?” “Jesus is Lord.” For the earliest Christians, this confession was true for every single aspect of their lives.

When they gave their time in service to others—Jesus is Lord.

When they came to the communion table—Jesus is Lord.

When they came to worship together—Jesus is Lord.

When they sat down to eat with their own family—Jesus is Lord.

When they went to work—Jesus is Lord.

Whenever and however they used the gifts given to them by the Spirit—Jesus is Lord.

Jesus is Lord and they were not. Jesus is Lord and we are not.

We all have gifts to share with one another, no one gift is better than another. We can all use our gifts to help and love one another, but when we reach the end of our rope, when we are tired and unsure we have anything left to give or we are not sure what to give anymore, we would do well to remember we don’t have to do it all. We

don’t have to be and do everything; in fact, we can’t.

Do you remember how the rest of The Giving Tree goes? The boy grows up and continues to ask more and more of the tree and she continues to give. He wants money to buy things and have fun, so the tree gives him her apples to sell. He wants a house, so the tree gives him her branches so he can build one. He wants a boat, so the tree gives him her trunk so he can sail away. The tree gives the boy everything she has until she is nothing but a stump. The tree tries to be and do everything for the boy, but she can’t. She becomes nothing but a stump. The boy does come back and sits on the stump, and the book concludes and says the tree is happy, but is she really? She has dwindled to nothing.

We need you and your gifts. Your gifts, whatever they may be, have been given to you by the Holy Spirit to be used for the common good. They have been given to you to love and care for one another, to make the world a little bit of a better place, but they have not been given to be and do everything. Jesus is Lord and we are not. We are many members in the one body of
Christ, and we do not have to go it alone and we do not have to and cannot do it all.

In January, I led a baptismal remembrance service after Vespers one Wednesday evening. If you’ve been a part of that service before or have yourself participated in an affirmation of baptism, then you know how it goes. You reach out your hand to touch the water and remember your baptism. The person leading then touches salt to your mouth and hands you a candle and says, “Remember you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.” When I did it, I borrowed the words of my friend and colleague Jared Jaggers when I had watched him lead it a few months earlier. As I sent each person out, I said, “Go out into the world and be who you are, letting your light shine.”

While this is a charge to go out to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, it is also a charge to be who God uniquely and beautifully created you to be. We are all different and unique, and as Paul tells us, that is very good news. We cannot be one body without every unique and beautiful child of God.