

SPIRITUAL GIFTS - DO WHAT YOU CAN
A SERMON BASED ON ROMANS 12:1-21
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
SUNDAY, OCTOBER 1, 2017
10:00 a.m.

While it has been around for the past half century or so,
it has been with the rise of digital and social media
that identity politics has really become known
as a force within society.

Identity politics refers to political positions based on the interests
and perspectives of social groups with which people identify.
It is politics through identity.

The list can be large

Identity by gender, by class,

by ethnicity, race, occupation or education.

Identity by sexual orientation, age, language, disability,

Identity by living urban or rural or by a political party.

In a push for policy or legislation,
the weight of an argument,

the validity of an idea,
the authority of the speaker or writer,
starts with and tends to be found in the named identity.

A case will be made with words like,

As a woman,

as a gay man,

as a person with a disability,

as a person of colour,

as a small business owner, a farmer,

as a Catholic, a Muslim, an atheist.

As a Liberal, a Conservative, an NDP'r.

Arguments, ideas, and authority will be refuted based on identity.

Men cannot understand women.

White cannot speak to colour.

The able cannot comprehend the disabled.

Faithless cannot weigh in on issues of faith.

And while it is extremely, and I would say critically important

to hear and listen to the voices of those directly affected

and not speak for or down to other identities,
nevertheless,
and perhaps ironically,
identity politics can lead to compartmentalization
exclusion, alienation, and social conflict.

The awareness of and phrase 'identity politics' may seem relatively new.

But the phenomenon isn't.

It was a huge issue in the early church.

All kinds of people were becoming Christians.

All kinds of people were putting their trust in Jesus.

Rich, poor, Greeks, Jews, slaves, free, women, men.

Goodness, an Ethiopian eunuch had become a Christian.

There had been compartments for all these people in society.

Everyone knew where they belonged and who they were.

But with Jesus,

the walls had come down and the early church
was trying to figure out how this was going to work,
Rich and poor, Greeks and Jews, slaves and free,
men and women,

all showing up for worship together.

What we read in Romans 12 today, comes right on the heels of Paul
spending chapters 9, 10 and 11
articulating and explaining the status of the people of Israel
in light of the teaching and faith in Jesus.
It is faith-identity writing and there was anxiety.

But Paul wants followers of Jesus to reach up and above identity politics.
He says, 'Do not conform to the pattern of this world.

Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought.

Think of yourself with sober judgement.

Just as each of us has one body with many members,

and these members do not all have the same function,

so in Christ we,

though many,

form one body,

and each member belongs to all the others.

You are not separate

because of your identity and difference.

You belong because of your identity and difference.

Each belongs to all the others.

In the movie adaptation of Tolkien's fantasy story

the Lord of the Rings,

there is a point in the movie where Frodo Baggins,

a short creature of humble stature and simple pleasures

called a hobbit,

offers to undertake a terrifying mission;

to carry The One Ring of Sauron,

a ring of tremendous power for evil that is a threat to the world.

Frodo offers to carry the ring,

on an epic quest through massive peril

to the Cracks of Mount Doom in Mordor

in order to destroy it.

Frodo is a hobbit,

in a world of wizards, and elves and dwarves and men

a hobbit wouldn't in any way appear to have the wits,

the strength,

or the endurance to make such a journey.

But Frodo has a willing spirit and an open heart.

In the movie, as a council is underway
to determine what could be done with the ring
Frodo steps forward.

“I will take it. I will take it. I will take the ring to Mordor...
though, I do not know the way.”

Gandalf, the mighty wizard says to him,

‘I will help you bear this burden, Frodo Baggins,
as long as it is yours to bear.

Aragorn, the noble king of men says to him,

‘If by my life or my death, I can protect you, I will.

You have my sword.’

Legolas the elf says,

‘And my bow’

Gimli the dwarf,

‘And my axe’

Frodo's best friend Sam, another hobbit,
uninvited to this secret council jumps forward,
seemingly out of nowhere.

'Mr. Frodo's not going anywhere without me!'

To which the elven chair of the council says,
'No indeed, it is hardly possible to separate you,
even when he is summoned to a secret council
and you are not.'

At which point two other hobbits,
two more of Frodo's friends Merry and Pippin appear,
'Wait! We're coming too.'

Elrond says,
'Nine companions. So be it. You shall be called,
The Fellowship of the Ring.'

To which the hobbit Pippin says, 'Great! Where are we going?'

Four hobbits, a wizard, two men, a dwarf and an elf.

The differences couldn't be more vast.

So to hear words of unconditional support that reach beyond identity.

To hear the promise of loyalty to the death.

To watch a fellowship emerge where none existed before.

It is a moving scene.

It is powerful to witness.

It is something we crave.

But something we believe impossible in this age of identity politics.

Hurt and disappointed with people,

categorized and labelled

we come to believe fellowship is something of fantasy

accessible only in fantasy writing

something for elves and dwarves and hobbits.

And so when the church is described as a fellowship,

we can't seem to come up with a vision

any more credible or inspiring

than coffee in the foyer after worship.

Great!! Where are we going?

Larry Crabb writes,

“The church is a community on a journey to God.”

He further writes “the formation of community

is the intricate, patient, painful work of the Holy Spirit.”

Which sounds so pure, ideal and noble.

However, these statements are in his chapter titled,

‘For God’s Sake, Don’t Expect It To Be Easy’

So in Romans 12 Paul writes for us how it is done

as the church starts out on it’s journey of fellowship.

He says,

Each of you belongs to all the others.

We have different gifts. Do what you can.

If your gift is prophesying. Do that.

If it is serving. Then serve.

If it is teaching. Then teach.

If it is encouraging. Then encourage.

If it is giving. Then give. Generously

If it is leading. Then lead. Diligently

If it showing mercy. Do it cheerfully.

Do what you can.

Be devoted to each other in love.

Bless those who persecute you.

Live in harmony with another.

Do not be proud.

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you,

live at peace with everyone.

Do what you can.

We look around the pews and ask is this the fellowship?

Coffee in the foyer maybe and to be honest, even that feels awkward.

But people who are willing to journey with me,

to help me carry the ring, and in God's name,

push back against evil in the world

bringing good to the world with me

on a journey to God?

Is this the fellowship?

Yes, this is indeed the fellowship.

It's the fellowship of the church.

So don't think of yourself more highly than you ought.

These are your people.

Love must be sincere.

Honour one another above yourselves.

Be joyful in hope,

patient in affliction,

faithful in prayer.

Share with the Lord's people who are in need.

Practice hospitality.

Do what you can.

The fellowship stands with you.

And you are called to stand with the fellowship.

Do what you can.

In light of what God's done for you,

in view of God's mercy,

offer yourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

Do not conform to the pattern of this world.

Reach higher for your identity.

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

In Christ, we, though many, form one body

and each of us belongs to all the others.

We are the fellowship.

So do what you can.

You will overcome evil with good.

Amen