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The Gaia of the Church

I Corinthians 12, Selected Verses

The Gaia of the Church resides in the expression of God's love and unity.

Hear these words of Scripture as taken from *The Message* translation from 1 Corinthians 12, selected verses:

God's various gifts are handed out everywhere, but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are carried out everywhere but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere, but God himself is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. You can easily see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts—limbs, organs, cells—but no matter how many parts you can name, you are still one body. If Foot said, "I'm not elegant like Hand, embellished with rings; I guess I don't belong to this body," would that make it so? If Ear said, "I'm not beautiful like Eye, limpid and expressive; I don't deserve a place on the head," would you want to remove it from the body? If the body was all eye, how could it hear? If all ear, how could it smell? No part is important on its own. Can you imagine Eye telling Hand, "Get lost, I don't need you! Or Head telling Foot, "You're fired, your job has been phased out?" The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don't, the parts we see and the parts we don't. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance. You are Christ's body—that's who you are! You must never forget this. Only as you accept you part of that body does your part mean anything. But, it's obvious by now, isn't it, that Christ's church is a complete Body and not a gigantic, uni-dimensional part? It's not all Apostle, not all prophet, not all miracle worker, not all healer, not all prayer in tongues, not all interpreter of tongues. And yet some of you keep competing for so-called 'important' parts. But now I want to lay out a better way for you.

It was the 1960s and NASA scientist, Dr. James Lovelock, had been given the assignment of discerning whether or not life existed on the planet Mars. He figured that if chemicals such as oxygen and methane existed with such stability in Earth's atmosphere as they do and if other planets held the same or similar make up, there would be evidence that life existed elsewhere. I doubt Dr. Lovelock set out to discover the consequence of this thought process and subsequent study but . . . discover he did. He soon developed what he called the Gaia Hypothesis. This highly controversial ecological hypothesis has since been tested enough that it does qualify as a theory. Nonetheless it suggests that the Earth is one life form and that all of the pieces that make up the organism of Earth work both with purpose and in concert with each other to keep the Earth in balance.

Dr. Lovelock received such criticism for his theory that he went to work with a man named Andrew Watson to develop a mathematical response. Together they created the Daisy World simulations. This simulation was based on a "planet" of plants. Imagine that picture, if you will. The plants, through

their in-take and submissions of various chemicals were able to stabilize their planet. Black daisies and white daisies were planted. The black daisies contributed to the planets' balance by absorbing light and warming the planet. The white daisies reflected the light and thus cooled the planet. This proved to Lovelock and Watson that the weather, water currents and the entire ecological system of earth were working in concert with each other to keep Earth stable and functioning.

Many centuries prior to that happening there was an Apostle by the name of Paul who had ministered in the church at Corinth and must have found himself a bit frustrated. His students in the church had heard what he'd taught them and somehow had missed some crucial pieces. They understood that God had given them gifts and that they were to put them to use but some gifts seemed more appealing. Specifically, speaking in tongues was pretty cool! All of a sudden these foreign languages that no one had ever heard before would just start coming out of someone but nobody understood what was being said. The gifts were being used as if they were some sideshow! Some people were being valued and praised over others because their gifts stole the show! The church was out of balance.

Paul had to back the truck up! He explained to them that they were not allowing the church to work as it was intended. They had to understand that the gifts were all equal in their value. Every gift had a purpose but that it had to be used in concert with the others. Everything had to work together. But it also wasn't enough for everything to work together if they were using the gifts to amuse each other. If that was the case, as it seemed to be in that church, then they were failing to understand even the larger picture. As members of the church they had responsibilities that began first with loving. It was love that existed behind every gift of God.

One of the members of our church family used to work in the uptown Charlotte area where he would dress each day in a high-powered suit and tie. He would walk the streets and smile at folks and they would smile back. You could sense the respect and mutual admiration. And then in the 1980s, he had the opportunity to open a new business. This business also required his presence downtown but this time he wore a uniform with his name, Carl, on the pocket. Carl entered buildings carrying needed equipment for his work of helping to put on events and people wouldn't even look at him. They didn't respect, admire or extend any kind of love toward him. And Carl Phillips was looked down upon. Even as he was, he wondered how others felt who had only known work in uniforms. And even as he was, he did everything in his power to extend love to everyone whom he met.

In his practice of living through those days Carl understood what the Apostle Paul understood—that love of God is demonstrated in two ways—internally and externally. When a person loves God they thirst to know more about God and they do everything in their power to nurture a relationship with God. When that is lived out, what is seen is a respect for others, an encouragement of others in the utilization of their gifts and talents, celebration with others, suffering with others, accepting everyone in spite of scars and foibles, non-judgment and a lack of expectations for how others or life for that matter should be. When love is evidenced in a person's life in this way, what becomes clear is that the Spirit resides in them.

Paul knew that one's attitude toward God determined who would receive the Spirit. To love God is to invite the Spirit of God to take root in your life. When that happens you are able to claim your God given gifts and use them fully and freely. They are not meant to be used in self-serving ways—only for the betterment of the community. When this happens, to borrow Dr. Lovelock's term, the Gaia of the

church begins to occur. Just as with the Gaia hypothesis, each member has a purpose that is lived out in concert with the others and the church finds balance.

If you know me, then you know that I am a hard worker. I do not shirk my responsibilities. Sometimes it is difficult for me to ask for help. That is the mentality that I had seven years ago when I left my last church to come here. With that perspective, I thought that I was offering the church a great service by planning their next year for them. I dotted the I's and crossed the T's so that they would be prepared when their new senior minister arrived. Everything would flow smoothly. Six years ago, I realized what a grievous sin I had committed. I began to hear how the church was falling apart. They needed me and weren't sure what to do since the plan I left ran out. I had made myself the church. I had robbed them of the opportunity to use their gifts and talents in cooperation with each other to be the church. I am not the church. Warren, Martha and Lee . . ., they aren't the church. Ministers come and ministers go but you remain. You! You are the church. For the Gaia of the church to take place in this place, you have to be the ones who are on purpose, using your gifts in cooperation with each other to make a difference. Because I love you, my dream for you is that the Gaia of the church will take place here.

It is out of God's love that God creates entities that must live and work in concert with each other. Even amid the diversity of life, love demands unity. The more we love, the more we overlook expectations and foibles. The more we love the more we work together by choice because we realize the value of the other. We are the less without that one.

It is like a healthy marriage. In a healthy marriage the partners are friends who find in each other solace, forgiveness, safety. There is a fullness of trust on which they can depend and eventually they determine that given the choice, though they could survive apart, they simply don't want to ever be separated.

That is what God wants for St. John's Baptist Church—to love each other as if we were healthily married to one another; to love God in that same fashion and then to love others in the community. When we do this we see the value in each other. We say, “hey, you have real financial savvy, you need to be serving on the finance committee!” Or “you are so hospitable and make everyone feel good about being together, have you thought about helping out at Family Night?” When we live this way, we live in honest communication, supporting and sustaining each other. We realize that we need each other. When others feel that kind of love, it will be irresistible. In the meantime, the choice for love, the choice for the Gaia of the church, is a choice for growth and cooperation in order to reveal to the world who God is and why God matters! May the Gaia of the Church be found in this place! Amen.