

## One and Many

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The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany  
The Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
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Genesis 12:1-9; 1 Corinthians 12:1-20; Matthew 16:13-23

“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” -- 1 Corinthians 12:7

As many of you know, I wasn't raised by my parents. My parents had both died by the time I was eight years old, and I was raised for the next ten years by an older brother and his wife.

And her mother, Pearl. And her father, Cyril. And her grandmother, Sarah. And her grandfather, Pete. And her aunt, Stelly. And her brother, Bobby. And her sister-in-law, Hettie.

And the members of the First Baptist Church, two blocks away. And the teachers and administrators at Newman Elementary School, five blocks away. And the succession of librarians at the Tell City Public Library on Tenth Street.

In short, the village worked. It raised this orphan, and on balance, I'd say they did all right. The heavy lifting, of course, fell to Don and Helen, and they did it as best they could, but they couldn't, entirely by themselves, raise an extra child, dropped into their lives literally overnight, and they didn't have to. Others stepped up and stepped in and made a reasonable success of what could have been a very bad situation indeed.

I thought of my unusual childhood and my unlikely prospects the other day in a conversation about why any of us goes into the professional ministry. I said that in my case, I felt I owed it to the people, whose ideals are represented, upheld, and affirmed by the institutional church, who had given me so much. They gave me the gift of guidance. They gave me the gift of affirmation. They gave me the gift of acceptance. They gave me the gift of correction. They gave me the gift of the Bible. They gave me the gift of Christianity. They gave me the gift of music.

And most of all, the church gave me the gift of the realm of God, that alternate reality that stands over and against and beneath all the political and social and economic realities we construct as adults.

But vastly more important than this, God's realm – the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, heaven, eternal life, life with God, whatever you want to call it -- introduced to impressionable and often lonely and bewildered children in the right way and at the right age, provides them with another option to the sometimes unhappy and abusive realities that children too often have to survive. And giving a helpless child the belief that there is another, better world than this one, and that they are a member of that world, and that they can use their lives to help make more and more of that world a reality in this one – that is the greatest gift the church, or anyone, can give a child or anyone.

I doubt very seriously that I would have made it to adulthood without the church

giving me that gift. Jesus said that we don't live by the food on our plates – which I always had plenty of at home – but by the words-that-are-not-literal-words that come from God, and I stand before you today as living testimony of the truth of that teaching. The church gave me God's words – words like love and forgiveness and redemption and peace and hope and reconciliation and heaven and hell and sin and salvation – those “wonderful words of life” that we sometimes sing about, and the church gave me the place and opportunities to use those words and explore them and accept them and reject them as I have been forced and able to do, and that has made all the difference for me.

It was not my own private musings about Christianity or readings of the Bible that did this for me. It was my interacting with other believers, some like me, some quite unlike me, as well as non-believers – again, some like me, some very unlike me – that forced me, again and again, to examine and re-examine those words and what they actually meant in real life.

And none of that could have happened without the church and the village of which the church has always, for me, been a part. I didn't and couldn't have done any of that by myself; the one needed the many and the many needed the one. Or in John Donne's more memorable line, “No man is an island.”

This sermon grew from an observation Ron Ober made last week in our adult forum about the American idea of rugged individualism, and how that idea so often hampers our attempts to solve social problems. The idea has evolved to mean that everyone can become successful and rich if we keep government out of the way and the government's hands out of taxpayers' pockets. Opportunity, this idea goes, is freely available to everyone in this country; the only thing that's required is hard work – there's the rugged individualism -- and those who aren't successful are simply not trying. And the corollary idea is that no one should force anyone else, through policy or taxation, to help anyone else; aid should be entirely voluntary. Those twin ideas, in various forms and permutations, have been part of America's thinking from our very beginnings.

One of the recurrent themes in William Bradford's *History of Plymouth Plantation*, a reconstruction of which some of us will visit this summer, is the perennial struggle between individuals set on personal private gain and the community's need and right to regulate personal, social, and economic activity for the common good. Governor Bradford, of course, never used the expression “rugged individualism” to describe the behavior he and the other leaders of Plymouth Colony so frequently had to keep in check, but that's what he's describing, and his narrative is filled with warnings about the dangers of people looking to their own prosperity at the expense of the community.

Paul warned of the same danger in our epistle reading this morning. He famously used the metaphor of the body to describe to the members of the Corinthian church how they were related to one another. Each one was indispensable to the whole, and the whole was indispensable to each one. Neither could function, as it should and could have, without the other. Whatever spiritual gifts the individual members of the Corinthian church might possess, they were to be used, as our text says, “for the common good.”

Is earning money a spiritual gift? Is getting ahead a spiritual gift? Is succeeding a spiritual gift? Is having power over others a spiritual gift?

We tend to make a sharp break between spiritual gifts and material possessions; the former we receive, the latter we earn. Or so we say. This is mine – I earned it. You can't have it. If you want something like it, earn it yourself.

That's the economic philosophy of rugged individualism. The level playing field, opportunity for all, freedom from group regulation or interference.

What is missing from this picture is any sense of corporate responsibility, any

sense that much of what we receive as individuals is made possible by the effort of a group.

Back in October, I put a quote from Professor Elizabeth Warren on the front of our bulletin. Professor Warren teaches at the Harvard Law School and is an expert on bankruptcy. She was born in Oklahoma and was educated, among other places, at the University of Houston, hardly a hotbed of leftist politics. But Professor Warren understands the relationship between the group and the individual better than most, and here's what she says about the responsibilities of successful people to the rest of us:

"[T]here is nobody in this country who got rich on his own. Nobody. You built a factory out there? Good for you. But I want to be clear: you moved your goods to market on the roads the rest of us paid for; you hired workers the rest of us paid to educate; you were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for. . . . You built a factory and it turned into something terrific . . . ? God bless. Keep a big hunk of it. But part of the underlying social contract is you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along" (*The Christian Century*, Oct. 18, 2011, p. 9).

Once upon a time, I was that kid who came along and needed the resources of the group to get myself through life. I needed the work-study programs. I needed the Pell grants. I needed the low-interest or no-interest loans.

All the bleeding-heart liberal lefties who put together those social programs that allowed underprivileged kids like me to go to college and then to professional school and then to graduate school – they paid a chunk of their success forward for the sake of the common good. They understood and understand that the body politic is exactly as Paul described the church – a body. When part of it suffers, all of it suffers. When we neglect part of it, we neglect all of it. When we pursue and protect the welfare of only a part, we jeopardize the health of the whole. That's a political lesson, but I learned it in church.

There's a lot of talk these days among the chattering classes about being spiritual but not religious, and the institutional church has become the poster child for intolerance and bigotry. No one knows the weaknesses of the institutional church better than a church professional like me, so I freely acknowledge the church's many sins.

But when I look around me, at the other institutions vying for human allegiance, none of them, it seems to me, has seen as clearly, and balanced as carefully, the inextricable relationship between the one and the many. The church doesn't promote rugged individualism; it promotes the manifestation of God's Spirit in each of us for the common good. So I ask you this morning in closing: In the long arc of your life, is there any other place you would rather be?