

We might think of the apostle Paul as the first church consultant. He'd started churches on his travels, but he couldn't be with all of them at once, so he wrote them letters. He wanted them to be strong whether he was present with them or on the road. Apparently, the church at Corinth needed to be reminded that all the parts of the body of Christ are important to the well-being of the whole. And so Paul takes great pains to specifically name some of the varieties of gifts that the church members of Corinth contributed to the good of the whole and he points out that though the gifts vary, the same Spirit (with a capital S) is the source of all.

Sometimes the church needs to remember this lesson of the whole body working best when each part works well. It is a lesson counter to the culture in which we live most of our time. Many people live out their work week in a cut-throat, competitive culture where people often get ahead by proving that their gifts and their abilities are superior to those of their co-workers. So it's a real switch to come to church and put aside how our world functions day in and day out, in order to become a community of prayer. But oh, how we need this time because our culture that thrives on competition and comparison results in many people who are way too hard on themselves. They live with tapes running through their heads of who they should be and all they should do and they seem to never measure up to these great expectations. We need to hear often a word of grace -- a grace that is within the community of prayer called church.

The noted teacher of religious education, Parker Palmer, wrote a book called *To Know As We Are Known*. In it he describes three virtues for creating a community of prayer that will nurture the variety of gifts of all members.

The first virtue that needs to be present in such a community is humility. He says **“Humility is the virtue that allows us to pay attention to ‘the other’ (p.108).”** Humility is to make space for other voices even those that disagree with us and to create room for the gifts of others to be expressed and honored. Humility allows us to be good listeners, listening behind the words spoken to the deep pain or breathe of personal experiences that influence the spoken words. But to be able to be in a place of humility, we first need to know the grace that is there for us not because we are so good or so accomplished but because we have been known and loved by our Creator.

I've been trying to think of all the things I need to do before leaving on sabbatical. My list includes thinking of you and my prayers are that you will know God's grace deep in your soul. Today I pray that you will have the peace of knowing that grace.

If you are sick of heart and carry a heavy burden, may you know the Spirit of grace surrounding you and comforting you.

If you are facing an important decision about work, about a relationship, or perhaps a decision regarding a life transition, may the grace of Christ be like a soothing balm to you.

If you feel lonely or perhaps you are mourning the loss of a loved one or mourning the loss of an active life that you no longer are able to live as you would wish, I pray the grace of God fill the empty corners of your heart.

Perhaps you're struggling with parenting teenagers who think they're all grown up or parenting a child having difficulty with school or even parenting babies who can't tell us what they need, I pray you will give yourself ample grace knowing that being a parent is about the hardest work of all, that “this too shall pass,” and that you are not alone in your struggles.

Whatever weighs on your heart today, I pray for you to experience the full measure of God's grace to give your strength and courage. Grace is the word for the day. Grace makes possible humility which is a virtue necessary for God's community of prayer.

Returning to Parker Palmer's teachings, the second virtue which leads us to a community of prayer is a commitment to proclaim one's own faith. Humility and faith, held in tension, ***"help us to know when to listen and when to speak, when to accept and when to resist, when to yield to the tuggings of the communal bond and when to tug back."***

***"There is no formula, no technique, that can guarantee this balance. It can only be sought and found in the heart made humble to others and yet faithful to itself through spiritual discipline."***

This brings us to the third virtue of any caring community, the virtue of reverence. The virtue of reverence goes beyond the virtue of humility and even beyond the virtue of faith proclaimed. It is a reverence of the presence of the Spirit, the source of all gifts. It is a reverence to what the Spirit creates, the whole that is greater than the mere sum of all individual member's gifts. It is revering the transcendent among us that lifts us up to that which is beyond ourselves so that we are vessels for God's presence in the world. This reverence moves us to a place of prayer.

And in this community of prayer, where in humility we profess who we are and where we are heard (even if not agreed with), we dwell in reverence to the One Spirit who lives and dwells in each of us and all God's beloved creation. Within this virtue of reverence and prayer, Parker Palmer says: ***"we learn to know others and the world in the same loving way. The mind immersed in prayer no longer thinks in order to divide and conquer, to manipulate and control."*** (p. 12).

So it must not be an accident that these words of Paul intended to create community within the church come just before what is one of the most familiar of all chapters in the whole Bible, I Corinthians 13, the chapter on love. In it, Paul says: ***"now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; one day we will know fully even as we have been fully known."***

My grandmother, Ella Mae Gilmore, was faithful all her life; not perfect, but faithful. She loved the hymn *Face to Face with Christ my Savior*. She dreamed of ending her life in that place of reverence, face to face with God. Whenever we ended our visits to grandma's house, she'd ask my Dad to sing that hymn for her, and then we'd leave. I'd look out the back window of the car crying and thinking it might be the last time I saw her. This hymn expressed for her the ultimate community of prayer; that holy place of reverence, face to face, to be fully known, fully loved.

Some people don't come to church unless or until they are in desperate straits. I wonder sometimes when folks call the church for help and we help them out why it doesn't occur to them that belonging to a church might help them in all kinds of ways.

I think they are missing out on a lot. Because it is within church, within this community of prayer, that we can be known, valued, and loved for the gifts we have to offer, whatever they may be, and where we can experience a grace that we rarely find anywhere else in the world. I am grateful to be here in this community of prayer. AMEN