

DIFFERENCE IS BEAUTIFUL

I Corinthians 12:4-12

No one is just like me. No one else in the world is just like you. All can be glad that this is true.

God must have had a great time making a world with such variety. The whole thing tells us something about God and also about ourselves.

We are different from each other. Difference can be a beautiful thing. Difference is beautiful when it is received as a gift from God, and then taken and used for His glory. This is what Paul was saying to people who wondered how God works and does things. This is the way He does them. God's Holy Spirit infiltrates the differences that people have, and He uses them for great things. When the Spirit of God is in it and in control, difference is beautiful.

Paul tells us, "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them. There are different ways of serving, but it is the same Lord who is served. There are different abilities to perform service, but it is the same God who gives ability to everyone for all services. Each one is given some proof of the Spirit's presence for the good of all. The Spirit gives one man a message of wisdom, while to another man the same Spirit gives a message of knowledge. One and the same Spirit gives faith to one man, while to another man he gives the power to heal. The Spirit gives one man the power to work miracles; to another, the ability to tell the difference between the gifts that come from the Spirit and those that do not. To one man he gives the ability to speak with strange sounds; to another, he gives the ability to explain what these sounds mean. But it is one and the same Spirit who does all these; he gives a different gift to each man, as he wishes. For Christ is like a single body which has many parts. It is still one body, even though it is made up of different parts."

One time there was an orchestra. It wasn't big and it wasn't small, but it was splendid. Together the instruments made beautiful music. The violins sang like soprano breezes, gliding up and down the scale. The bases plunked and thumped the foundation beat that got many feet to tapping. The oboes and the flutes punctuated the air with sounds like glistening raindrops. The horns called every listener to attention. The drums rolled and tapped and shook the rafters with their happy noise. The cymbals and the cellos and trombones, piano and harp all joined together to make it the finest orchestra in the area.

One day the orchestra got together without the conductor, determined to show that they could do it all alone, not all together but each one alone. The violins, naturally, thought they were the most important part of the group. They began to play louder than the other instruments. The trumpets declared with a loud blast that nobody was going to outshout them. The bassoons thought it would be a good idea to race, so they played a little faster than the rest. The piccolos, not to be outdone, played even faster than that. The drums joined in the competition with crash and bang that could be heard quite a distance. Soon there was not any music at all, just plain noise. Noise, noise, and more noise — that was the result — some people called that music. After all, when there isn't anything else, what are you going to do?

Difference can be terrible, and difference can be beautiful. It depends on how you look at it. It also depends on what you do with it. We can all blow our own

horns, and we can play our own violins as if we were the only ones in the whole world. A lot of people are doing that, and they are the most unhappy people in the whole world. They think they are getting somewhere, and they are: farther and farther away — away from God Who is the center of all things, and away from other people without whom they cannot possibly live as they should. There is a lot of noise around, but not very much music.

Some people have drawn the conclusion that difference is ugly. They treat difference as if it were ugly. You look different from me; therefore, you are ugly. That is the way this thinking goes. You have a different color of skin; therefore, you are ugly. You have a different life style; therefore, you are ugly. You have a hundred thousand dollar income a year, and I don't; therefore, you are ugly. You are poor, and I am rich; therefore, you are ugly. You are rich, and I am poor; therefore, you are ugly. You did not have much schooling and I went to college; therefore, you are ugly. You think and I don't; therefore, you are ugly. You don't think and I do, therefore, you are ugly.

Paul teaches us that difference is or can be beautiful. It is beautiful when the Spirit of God is in it and controlling it. Otherwise, it easily gets to be ugly. God makes the difference. He makes the difference beautiful.

Opposites attract, people say. Yes, but they also get into conflict with one another. A husband and a wife may differ in their ideas, ideals, values, and standards. The result, more often than not, is disharmony in the marriage, quarreling in the home, and sometimes a complete breakdown of the whole marital relationship.

Nations differ with one another on their national ideas and goals. More often than not, these differences result in conflict, and sometimes in open warfare. You can see it right now in certain hotspots of the world.

When Jesus Christ came into the world, the result was not all sweetness and light. Differences arose when He came telling the good news and went about healing people. He cared about people as they were, different as they were. There were those who did not like that. Some of them were powerful, and had a lot of influence in the community. They said: "You must obey our rules. You can't help anybody if it means breaking a rule — like doing something for him or her on the Sabbath." It was just a religious difference, of course, but it brought about His crucifixion.

What happened on the day when Christ was crucified touches all of us. It was deeply personal, and still is. I had a part in it, and so did you. He died for us all. He paid the price of our waywardness, and our wilfulness. He took our stubborn prejudices into His own heart. We put Him there. We have forgiveness and salvation because He atoned for our sins.

In December 1969, a woman wrote a letter to a newspaper in the Western part of the United States saying that she was disturbed to note that there were people who in their church services publicly confessed that they were poor, miserable sinners. She could not understand how there were people, who particularly the young, reared in this kind of belief, could take a positive attitude toward themselves and others. A sixteen-year-old boy, named Chris Woodside, wrote a letter in response to this woman. Here is what he said: "I belong to a church in which we make the confession that we are sinful and unclean." He explained a number of ways in which he took a positive attitude toward life by helping people. Later when he graduated from college, he said, he planned to teach retarded and handicapped children. Not to believe that you are a sinner in God's sight, he wrote, is a lie not only to yourself but also to God.

We are sinners. We accept responsibility for bringing Christ to the place where He was, but what has that got to do with the undeniable differences that exist among us? What could Christ possibly do about that? The Bible is repeatedly referring to Christ as the reconciler. He reconciled man to God by His blood. No man can pay a bigger price than his own life blood, and Christ paid that. No man can do anything better for the world than to take the differences which separate people and bring them together in the service of Christ. Christ did that by His death on a cross, and His resurrection to life again. He lives, and commands the allegiance of all kinds of people, with all kinds of abilities, and all kinds of gifts.

Jesus Christ changes things. Everybody who says, "Jesus Christ is Lord" is guided by the Holy Spirit. That is what Paul said. The Spirit of God does things in His own way. There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them. There are different ways of serving, but the same Lord is served. There are different abilities to perform service, but the same God gives ability to everyone for all service. Each one is given some proof of the Spirit's presence for the good of all. People are different, and there is no use in trying to ignore the fact. The Spirit of God does not ignore it. He takes the differences and He makes them beautiful.

The Spirit of God gives one man a message of wisdom, while to another man the same Spirit gives a message of knowledge. One and the same Spirit gives faith to one man, while to another man He gives the power to heal. The Spirit gives to one man the power to work miracles, to another the gift of speaking God's message; yet to another man, the ability to tell the difference between the gifts that come from the Spirit and those that do not. It is one and the same Spirit Who does all of these things; He gives a different gift to each person, as He wishes.

Unity in diversity is a phrase often used. Just as often it does not mean anything. Diversity itself does not automatically result in unity. The secret of unity in diversity is the Holy Spirit. He does things with diversity that no one else could possibly do. He takes people who never talk to each other, brings them to faith in Jesus Christ, and they work together in the service of the Lord. He gives different gifts. Those people were not all the same before and they are not the same now. They have one thing in common: they have the Holy Spirit. The dazzling variety of His gifts is harmonized into the service of one Lord Whom we recognize as the Son of God and Saviour of men.

In recent years it has become fashionable to talk about "charismatic" leaders. A charismatic leader is one who has that extra something that makes him extraordinary. He has what it takes to be ordinary and extraordinary.

That word "charismatic" is the one used by Paul in the text. It means gift. There are different kinds of spiritual gifts. God gives His people charisma, to make each man different from the other. The gifts are beautiful, and the difference is beautiful. That is what Paul tells us here. Generously granted, God's gifts should be gratefully received. God is a great, good, and generous giver, sublime in His sharing with men of what He is and what He has.

If you want to know what God is like, look at His Son. Christ came to seek, to save, and to serve. Each one is given a gift which is to be used for the good of others and for the glory of God. Difference becomes beautiful when it is the vehicle of the Spirit of God.

Doubtless Paul's teaching shook some people. It shakes people today. The common man thinks that people ought to be like him. In his mind, difference is ugly, and far from beautiful. He would like for others to be like him.

It is on the inside that the Spirit does His work. That is where the difference really blooms, and it is beautiful. Faith in Christ produces uncommon men, with various gifts from the Holy Spirit. They are different from one another, and they do not mind it. The difference is a gift. They can't brag about it as if it were something special. They must just take it and use it for the good of all.

The gifts of the Spirit are many. The end product is something like an orchestra, with a number of different instruments, together producing beautiful music. Having a common purpose with only one conductor, the difference becomes beautiful.

There is design in this world, but there isn't any more beautiful design than the one being drawn right now by the Holy Spirit. I have seen His work in the world. He does things in His own way. The people He works with are different from others, and different from one another. But it is one and the same Spirit Who does all this; He gives a different gift to each man, as He wishes.

The cross is an ugly symbol of a lot of cruel things, but He made it beautiful. Lifted up on the cross, He draws all kinds of people to Himself. They serve the one Lord because they are all filled and led by the same Spirit. They have unity in Christ, but each one is different. With all of their differences, each is given some proof of the Spirit's presence in his own life for the good of all and for the glory of God. May the Holy Spirit take the differences in our personalities and gifts and use them and make them beautiful in the service of God!