

*“Gifts of Light in the Beloved Community”*

Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

Second Sunday of Epiphany

Message for January 16, 2022

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The theme of light is powerful in both of our wisdom teachings today. The psalmist prays to God, describing the Divine as “the fountain of life” and proclaiming, “in your light we see light.”

As we noted last week, we more readily see the light in contrast to the darkness, and in today’s psalm, the dark is described beautifully in describing the shelter that can be found there: “All people may take refuge in your wings.” A beautiful image reminding us of the protection and guidance that God provides us.

Psalm 36 is one of the songs of wisdom - the Psalms range in their orientation: there are royal psalms (because they feature the king, portraying him as both the representative of Yahweh to the community and the representative of the community to Yahweh) and there are songs of wisdom. There are also Psalms of disorientation that express lamentation or describe retribution, and there are Psalms of reorientation, which are often songs of pilgrimage or thanksgiving.

We heard six of the verses out of a total of twelve, which make up the entirety of Psalm 36, which is entitled, “Human Wickedness and Divine Goodness.” The Psalmist was living in the midst of people who do not have a connection to the Divine. It was a me-centered community, and the person who is praying is aware of the opposition in that community to God and to those who believe.

This morning’s reading focuses on God’s steadfast love; reminding us that we are held and loved by the source that guides and supports us. This love is available to all who “know” God and who are “upright in heart.” What might this mean?

If we remember that we are invited into *relationship* with the Divine. If we think about what it means to be in relationship with ourselves, with others,

and with creation, we are able to recognize that the intention of knowing and being known are at the center of any relationship.

As we connect with others, we strive to understand them, to hear them and see them, to attend to their needs, to honor what they deem important, and engage in a regular practice of interacting with them. Truly, this is at the core of being in relationship with God.

Although we will never comprehend the mystery, we can bask in the love and grace that is embedded in God's care of each and every aspect of creation. And to be "upright of heart?" This is to remember that we are not in this alone - that although our society tries to tell us that we are independent, we are actually interdependent.

When we are directed to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps or just work harder or strive for success - we must turn instead to the Source, knowing that we are worthy of love no matter our station in life, and that it is through relationship with ourselves, with one another, and with God, that we truly understand why we are here and what we are called to do.

The Apostle Paul speaks to the people of Corinth in our New Testament reading today. Corinth is an important and wealthy city on the narrow strip of land separating Northern and Southern Greece. Paul spent 18 months there and established a church there. Paul wrote this letter in response to a report that there were problems in the Corinthian church after he left.

In chapters 12-14 of this letter, Paul speaks to the issue of spiritual gifts. Rather than celebrating one another's gifts, the Corinthian Christians had become prideful concerning their particular gifts and dismissive of the gifts of others. So, rather than connecting the community, spiritual gifts had become another form of division among them. The word used for these gifts translates as special abilities given by God to God's people for God's service.

Paul reminds us that among the "varieties of gifts," God "activates all of them in everyone." Certainly, as we've heard in our gathering today, we can readily recognize the gifts that were activated in Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and also in the poet Amanda Gorman.

Many of us more easily see the gifts in famous people or in those we look up to or those we observe from afar. And many of us perceive others as having more to offer than we do, or we assume that someone who is filling a

particular role well is able to do so without practice or intention - as though all gifts just come naturally and without effort.

But when God activates a gift within us that does not take away from our task of developing and growing that gift. This growth and development are deepened within a community. When the beloved community recognizes and names gifts within us, that is often the first step in noticing what we have to offer and what we are capable of. The beloved community acts as a catalyst in activating that gift. We are responsible for ourselves and for one another.

Through discussions this week in our worship groups, it was noted how miraculous it is that even when small groups come together, the different gifts of individuals come together in ways that meet the needs of those who have gathered.

When we strive to be “good” at something, when we worry about whether we’ve succeeded or failed, we lose sight of what is possible within the beloved community. If instead we recognize that we are living a life of contribution rather than of success, we are getting to the heart of our intention and our purpose.

Ultimately, we are called to find the strength and the will to live into who we are and trust that our gifts will be put to good use: *abilities given by God to God’s people for God’s service.*