

## COMMODITY OR COMMUNITY?

Isaiah 62: 1-5  
I Corinthians 12:1-11

Faith Community  
January 14, 2001

### Introduction

I've never been part of a focus group before, but between Thanksgiving and Christmas I was invited to be part of one put together by a church consulting organization in this area. About twenty-five pastors from all over southeast Michigan and Windsor gathered around a huge boardroom table to talk about how the church had changed recently, and what we expected in the future.

Early on in the discussion one of the women pastors made a comment that crystallized for many of us what has been going on in the church. She said, "I think most people in the church view it as the place that provides their spiritual commodities. When they need food, they go to the grocery store; when they want to exercise they go to the health club; when they want to be entertained, they go to the movies; when they want spirituality, they go to church. "I think people in the church see themselves as consumers who are looking for a product, and they are looking for the best place that can provide them with that product. It is very much a self-oriented, consumer mentality.

"Sometimes I feel like they want to drop their junior high kids off on a Sunday evening and expect to come back later and pick them up, now complete with faith. Materialism permeates the rest of our culture, now it has invaded the church. It's like spirituality is another product that people want to negotiate to get. Sometimes it feels like we're the spirituality store."

Interestingly, every one of the ministers around the table agreed with her.

### I

Now, contrast this picture with what Paul says about the church. Everything we have is a gift from God to be used for the common good. It's not "take what you can get for yourself and go home," but everyone work together in sharing the gifts God has given us so that the whole group is built up, made stronger, helped to be more faithful.

Paul begins at the beginning. All of us have different gifts and abilities, but all of them come from God. They are gifts to us from a loving God. We don't do anything to earn them. He is not a talented musician because he was good and God is rewarding him for that. It is a gift given at birth. She is not extremely intelligent because God likes her better or because she has been an outstanding person, she was given that intelligence before she ever had a personality.

Last Monday at the American Music Awards one of the male vocalists won an award, he walked to the podium and his first words were, "The talent I have is a gift from my Creator. First I want to thank my God who has given me whatever ability I have." That person knows about God!

What we have is a gift from God. Yes, we can develop it or not, but the basic ability is a gift given to us by God.

### II

The gifts God gives are all different. Paul lists some examples for us – wisdom, faith, the ability to teach, knowledge, a strong sense of discernment and good judgment, the ability to heal.

God created us with diversity. That we are different from each other is God's intention for us. So diversity is not an obstacle to be overcome, but a gift to be celebrated. Thank God we are not all alike.

Have you ever thought about what the world would be like if everyone was exactly like you? Just imagine, for example, who would go out of business, and who would thrive. If everybody were just like me there wouldn't be any Hudson's department store (not to mention Lord and Taylor, Bonwit Teller, Saks, and the rest). Borders Books would be about the size of Twelve Oaks Mall, and Twelve Oaks could fit in a place the size of Big Boy. The selection of restaurants would be 85% Mexican, and two thirds of all fast food restaurants would be Taco Bells. Rather than being in Chapter 11 bankruptcy, movie theaters would be making money hand over fist. Everyone in the world would go to a play at least once a month. No one would have ever been on a cruise.

On the other hand, no one would ever have been arrested, no one would have more than two traffic violations, and everyone in the world would be in church every Sunday – although they probably would all want to be up front leading the service!! Everyone would be right-handed, short, male, overweight, and struggling to hold on to what hair they have left. So aren't you glad we're not all the same!

The different gifts we are given are a cause for great celebration. We are not all alike - we can thank God for that. Just the fact that other people don't think the same way we do is a tremendous gift. We are enriched by what we learn from people who look at the world a little differently than we do. Bill Moyers put it very well when he said, "Only talking with people who agree with you, is like jogging in a cul-de-sac."

### III

The gifts we are given are not for ourselves, but for the common good. I don't receive my gift from God to take it home and hoard it for myself. God gave me gifts to share with God's other children. The abilities I am given are to be offered to other people in the church who don't have the same gifts I have. Others in our faith community offer gifts that I don't have. We share with each other from the abilities God has given each of us.

What we value is interdependence rather than independence. The congregation is not self-centered, but community centered. I don't come to church for ME, but for US.

When we named this church we intentionally called it a community. When we went to choose a name for this emerging congregation we began with the word community. We wanted to create a close community of people here. Then we asked ourselves, "What is the basis of this community?" The obvious answer was, "A community of faith."

To be a spiritual community means that we all care for each other, trust each other, learn from each other, serve each other. As Paul put it so beautifully, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together."

### Conclusion

See how far this is from a consumer mentality? We don't offer a commodity, we offer a community. Certainly we find in this faith community the spirituality and values and development of faith we are looking for, but we don't do it on a lonely journey turned in on ourselves. To be in a close community of faith means not to be alone, but together; not distant, but close; not a consumer, but a participant; not for me, but for us, not impersonal, but intimate. Caring for each other is the key to a solid church community.

Fred Craddock's father was one who made fun of the church and its faith. Mrs. Craddock was very active in her church, but whenever anyone from the church called, her husband would make fun of her. If members of the church came to visit her, her husband would make it a point to be gone from the house. He said, "All they are after is your money. They don't care about you, all they are really interested in is getting your money."

At the end of his life, Mr. Craddock contracted cancer of the throat. In his last days he could not speak.

On one of his final visits to see his father, Fred went into his hospital room and found it filled with flowers and cards. The small table beside his bed was stacked high with cards. The windowsills could hardly let in light because each one held all the flowers that would fit. The bulletin board on the wall was covered with cards. Virtually every one of these expressions of concern came from people in Mrs. Craddock's church. They knew of his condition from her prayers offered at church., and they responded.

As Fred sat down beside the bed, his father started to write on a tablet of paper, since he couldn't speak. He wrote out these words, "I draw my labored breath to say, I was wrong. I was wrong."

Amen