



Day 2: Ubuntu

Introduction to Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:1–27

Corinth had trouble understanding some things that are core to Christian identity today. They had divisions based on wealth, status, experience, ability, etc. While we may better understand what a “blessed community of God” is supposed to be, it doesn’t mean we are any better at living it. In some ways, the Corinthians get some grace because the concepts were new to them. A couple thousand years later, we still wrestle with division, self-promotion, sharing of power, and effectively assuring everyone that they are loved and needed.

In genuine community, there is never a conflict between being who we authentically are, the gifts we have been given, and our ability to learn from others. In this way, we are mutually empowered by the same Spirit. This is to suggest that power is not one-sided or unilateral, in which some try to impose their will on others. Rather, there is a mutual empowerment in which we are affected by others while also making an impact on them; a relational power gifted to us by Holy Spirit. This structure of gifts and mutual support is designed for the common good.

Henry Nelson Wieman writes, “Good is grounded in our deep awareness of others, our willingness to participate in mutual transformation, the expansion of quality, the increase of meaning that comes from increasing connectedness, and the deepening of communion among all who participate in relationship.”²

² Henry Nelson Wieman, *The Source of Common Good*, quoted in Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journey of the Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroads, 1993), 48,49.

We hear this reflected in Desmond Tutu saying, “We are human because we belong. We are made for community, for togetherness, for family, to exist in a delicate network of interdependence... [Each] person is not just to be respected but to be revered as created in God’s image. To treat one such as if they were less than this is not just evil... it is veritably blasphemous, for it is to spit in the face of God.”³

Paul is doing his best to help the church in Corinth understand this concept of common good and common humanity, in the sharing of the Spirit. As we glean a message for today, drawing on Paul’s words and the wisdom of the Church over the generations since, we are reminded that we do not all have to become the same in the Spirit. We are not called to live as a melting-pot community—but, rather, we are a mix of distinct ingredients that together complement and expand the potential of all.

Daily Theme: *Ubuntu*

Ubuntu is drawn from a longer phrase that translates as, “I am, because you are.” To properly couch the meaning of *ubuntu*, it is necessary to illumine the context from which it comes. This African term, *ubuntu*, speaks of the very essence of being human: generous, compassionate, caring, hospitable, friendly. For Tutu, *ubuntu* means, “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours... [A] person is a person through other persons... It is not, ‘I think, therefore I am.’ Rather, I am human because I belong. I participate. I share.”⁴ A person with *ubuntu* is said to be open, affirming, and self-assured, while not threatened by others.

African culture exalts harmony, friendliness, and community as the greatest goods. Therefore, anger, resentment, lust for revenge—even success through aggressive competitiveness—are corrosive of this good. Compared to Paul and the writers of the Bible, we live in a much smaller world, thanks to technology. Through advances in travel and communication, we connect with other cultures and learn from each other. Maybe Paul’s first letter

³ Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 196, 197.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

to the Corinthians would have been shorter if he could have just introduced them to *ubuntu*.

Ubuntu does not let us disrespect another in the community without disrespecting ourselves. We hear a similar concept as Paul explains that “less honorable” parts of the body are just as important and given special care. He goes on to affirm that no part of the body can claim to be self-sufficient. This highlights the tendency for some to disrespect others, and for some people to underestimate their own worth. *Ubuntu* challenges both and reminds us that neither the community, nor individual members of it, can reach their full potential without everyone’s gifts.

Did You Notice / Questions?

- The words *slave* and *free* are used very casually, like this was a common power dynamic in their world.
- Jews and Gentiles refer to those in the family of faith, and those beyond. What would be a similar dynamic in our world today?
- Are you more likely to divide by lifting yourself up, or by not assuming your own worth?
- How do we overcome power dynamics to create equal respect in community?
- What role does competition play in building or dividing community?

@ Work in Our World

The “common good” could also be said this way: “Team.” When one is on a team, there are several individuals who have their own unique talents. When joined with other members of the team, they make up a squad that leads to the “common good” or a successful outcome for the whole. In the same way, the scripture explains that we all have our individual gifts in community that allow us to be unified without the need to be uniform. In other words, though we are each uniquely individual, we can also work in harmony with each other to serve the common good. And what is the common good? It is for all of humanity, all of creation—including the Earth—to benefit from our love for ourselves and for one another, and for our actions and witness to be toward these ends.

The African concept of *ubuntu*, “I am because you are,” or, as Bishop Desmond Tutu posits,

“A person is a person through other persons,” grounds us in the knowledge that we need each other in this way—in mutual relationship—not only for the common good, but indeed, to survive. When we each bring our open-minded, open-hearted, diverse gifts and talents to build communities, we become something more. We know that we are always in the process of becoming, having never completely fulfilled our potential. In partnership with others and with God, we do our best to fill God’s world with beauty.

This concept can also be considered in terms of friendship. Irish poet John O’Donohue talks about *anam cara*, translated as “soul friend.”⁵ To be sure, a deep abiding friendship allows you to reveal the hidden intimacies of your life. This friendship is an act of recognition and belonging, a friendship that cuts across all conventions and categories, joining us in an ancient and eternal way as friends of the soul. And this friendship, as American Jewish holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel reminds us, “is like a religion.” When we embody our gifts, we become friends with, not only ourselves, but also with others in our community—with our neighbors, and with strangers.

In the end, the common good can be expressed as: team, community, friendship. Friendship is at the heart of our Christian witness; in fact, it is the dream of God for which we are all called to participate. “I am because you are”—so, go be your most full, vibrant self, and allow your light to shine in community with others for the common good.

⁵ John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* (New York: Harper, 2000), xvii.