

An early morning walk is a wonderful thing, well at least in warmer months! Yes, the birds wake me up early, and some days before the leaves came onto the trees, I could easily find which bird was singing that song! Now I just hear the various songs, and usually have no idea what the bird looks like! The world over, God speaks through lessons in nature, and while there are many lessons from birds (such as the early bird gets the worm!) the principal lesson I think about is the incredible diversity in the world of birds! I confess that I am not a “birder” yet, nor a member of the Audubon Society on Plum Island yet, but I have at least talked to the gift shop folks about what binoculars might be good for a novice!

So... Diversity! One of the favorite topics in the United Church of Christ and progressive-minded Christians.... And one of the favorite verses from the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Corinth, 1Corinthians 12 (easy to remember because it comes immediately before 1Corinthians 13, the famous passage on the gift of Love. Paul emphasizes that there are “varieties of gifts” (or diverse gifts) among human beings. Apparently within the Corinthian church there was an attitude of spiritual superiority among some, so Paul put forth the wonderful metaphor of the human body, where all the various parts are needed. He reminds us, “The eye can’t say to the ear, I have no need of you. The head can’t say to the foot I have no need of you!” The metaphor points to the deep truth that different as we may be, a Christian community, or the “body of Christ,” needs people with all varieties of gifts to function well!

I’m grateful to one member of our community who started forwarding daily devotional around, many years ago! The gift of good skills on the internet and with smartphones, but also the gift of knowing how much we all need a word of encouragement, comfort, or wisdom most days of our lives! I once was of the mindset that I did not need or want anything “daily!” And figured I had heard most of it all before, nothing new under the sun! But even if there is nothing

particular “new,” I find that daily reminders and refreshers are helpful. Not to say that I read them absolutely every day without fail, but most days I can find time to do a short reading and a prayer. I had always been pretty good about reading *These Days* or *Upper Room* or some spiritual reading, but now in this day and age when we are all engrossed in our digital devices, why not have a daily scripture and reflection pop into our email, to help lift the spirit, give some good focus for the day? /If a devotional booklet is not your cup of tea, try UCC.org, then look for Daily Devotionals... and possibly even add an inspiring subscription to your email inbox!

Part of the reason that became a fan of devotional readings over the years is precisely because of the truth Paul states, that there are *varieties of gifts*, and therefore *varieties of people*, so that we can learn and be enriched by so many different friends in faith! One thing I like to do with the *These Days* booklet (some still available in the front foyer!) is find out the background of each author in the front and then sometimes read all the entries (one or two weeks) of that author in one sitting. You get a feeling for some particular expression of Jesus’ Spirit that is shown in this particular person. One that I enjoyed recently was a Kelly Higgins from Canada, a clinical therapist. She leaned toward writing about unique things about people in her life, about interesting gifts of various people; one of them she called “Pie maker extraordinaire!” “Her love language was a pie, and when you unexpectedly received one of them, you felt loved!” Another person she wrote about was her own mother, who at 79 years old, on a hot summer day, was seen bringing a cooler of ice creams to homeless men sitting on a park bench. And she remembered her Sunday school teacher, who simply had a “quiet presence” that helped her through anxious teenage years.

As we learn from the birds, we all have a song to sing, or words to express, but after awhile, we probably have one overriding style or theme that sounds most like us. Think of pop singers... I don’t really

know a lot of them, but I think could identify a song by James Taylor, or a song by Bruce Springsteen, not to mention the very unique style and voice of Leonard Cohen! The same could be said for classical music... there is a particular and unique sound of J.S. Bach, and of Ludwig van Beethoven.

Another thing I have become a fan of recently, that tells me about the wonderful diversity of people in this world, is Rick Steeves' Europe on PBS TV. He is quite a good historian, but also a man of faith, so that his commentaries are both thoughtful and meant to inspire. He is a true proponent of getting to know "the other," people that are different from ourselves. His video documentaries are not just about Europe, people that are quite similar to many of us, but I've seen work he has done in Central America, Africa, and the Middle East as well. I did get his book called "Travel as a Political Act" and he begins the book with a section called "Travel as a Spiritual Act." In this section, he is humble and willing to learn. He says, *"The United States may be predominantly Christian, but it certainly does not set a world wide standard... Travel in the developing world has opened my eyes to new ways of interpreting the Bible. An American or European Christian might define Christ's preferential option for the poor differently from someone who has to put their children to bed hungry every night... Whether reading the Bible through Third World eyes, or having your hometown blinders wedged open by looking at another religion in a new way, travel can be a powerfully spiritual experience."*

The gift that the Black Church, and the Latin American Christians bring to the body of Christ is their understanding and promotion of Liberation Theology, quoting often the Jesus who came to "set captives free and to bring good news for the poor." Many Christian leaders who have taken this calling seriously have been killed for trying to liberate the poor, trying to change discriminatory laws and structures and dominating rulers that keep them oppressed and poor. Sometimes well off northern Christians like most of us, stop

at the level of charitable giving to the poor, without trying to go further, to walk with them, to find out what changes in society could give them more hope and more opportunities.

I would be remiss if I did not talk about the Same Spirit that gives us our diverse gifts. For Christians, naturally it is the Spirit that we see in Jesus, that continues in the world as the Holy Spirit. While I believe that people in all faiths have spiritual gifts, the unique gift of those following our Christ are the gifts of sacrificial love: a dedication to the common good even at some cost, the willingness to give of our lives, even give our lives for the sake of a greater good. The “Same Spirit” Paul speaks of is the spirit of the Good Shepherd, the spirit of Jesus himself, who guides and protects from the wolves, from those who would do harm. Jesus’ promise to protect and guide his sheep also supports diversity, for he says very clearly, “I have sheep in other folds” as well, and they know my voice. Jesus supports the individuality and diversity of followers. When we think of the intimate nature of all humans with their God, we are searching for a closer walk with God, all searching for meaning in life, all searching for more happiness, perhaps even love and joy, We can pray as Jesus did, that all might be “One.” We can pray for more unity of spirit... the same spirit... which is not uniformity in expression of that Spirit. I heard the warning a long time ago, that we were never meant to be “cookie cutter” Christians. No, we follow the same Lord, pray for the same Spirit, but will express that spirit with varieties of gifts! Amen? In some Christian folds, the people say.... AMEN!