

Unity of the Spirit
The Monroe Congregational Church , UCC
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Acts 2:1-4, 1 Corinthians 12:1-13 CEB

It wasn't too long after creation that the animals got together to form an institution of higher learning. They wanted the best education possible; one that offered each student a well-rounded curriculum of what animals are best known to do... swimming, running, climbing and flying.

In order to graduate, the animals agreed that they would each have to take all the courses. You know, like when a freshman English major at UCONN has to take Statistics (let me tell you, that was NOT my cup of tea)!

Now, the Duck was excellent at swimming. In fact, he was so much better than his instructor, that he became a teaching assistant! However, when it came to all his other courses, the Duck was barely passing. He struggled with climbing, even though he went in for extra help! Flying was a little bit better, but he kept losing track of where he was supposed to be in the "V" pattern, he was so very nervous about his cumulative GPA. Running class was maybe the worst – a complete catastrophe. Duck was so slow, he had to stay after the lecture every day to practice.

Over time, the best poor Duck could do was a slightly faster waddle. What was worse was that webbed feet got badly worn up from running, which was affecting his strongest class - swimming. An average grade in swimming was quite acceptable to everyone else, but not Duck.

His friend Rabbit was at the top of her class in running, but after a while she developed a twitch in her leg from all the time she spent in the water trying to improve her swimming.

Her friend Squirrel was a peak performer in climbing, but was constantly frustrated in flying class. His body became so bruised from all the hard landings that he didn't do too very well in climbing and ended up being pretty poor in running.

And Eagle? Well, she was a continual problem student – a total non-conformist! Just as an example, in climbing class she would always beat everyone else to the top of the tree, but only because she used her beak to get there and not just her sharp claws (that was kind of cheating, the others thought).

It turns out, each of the animals had a particular area of expertise, a talent, a predilection, a gift. And when the animals did what they were designed to do, they

excelled. But once they tried to be an expert outside their area of expertise, they were not nearly as effective.

Can Ducks run? Can a rabbit swim? Can an Eagle climb? Can a Squirrel fly? Of course they can! But is that what they do best? Definitely not. It's not their gift.

I've been thinking about this old folktale a lot this week. Each one of us are given innate gifts by God, and one of them is the gift of discernment. Each of us has experienced this time away from each other differently. Some of us have been continuing to serve our community as healthcare, first responders, or other essential workers. Some of us have continued to live in quarantine, working from home, teaching our kids from home, staying put (at home). Some of us are considering what leaving quarantine might look like. And I know it's difficult some times to make the best decisions, at a time when so much information is coming at us at such a rapid pace.

Paul says that the gifts of the Spirit are various and diverse and manifested "for the common good". Paul goes on to say not everyone possesses the same gifts. So how may we, in this time of covid-19, discern the best practices we might take for the common good? How do we test the Spirit, not only for ourselves but for our loved ones, our communities, and our church?

I think, if I wanted to learn how to swim as safely as possible, there would be no finer teacher than a Duck. And if I wanted to learn how to fly high above the crowds, it would be best to follow the good advice of the Eagle. That's why I've listened carefully to people with medical degrees about what the safest choices are for me and my family during this time of pandemic.

So, we limit our time in crowds. And we wash our hands frequently. And we wear masks in public and try not to touch our faces. Not because we live in fear, but because people who have studied infectious diseases have tested out the protocol – that until there is a cure, we risk harming each other without even knowing it. I'm sure that you, too, want to keep as many people as safe as possible. That's a fine way of loving our neighbors and following our teacher and brother, Jesus Christ.

The history of humanity is a story of division. Think back to the story of the Tower of Babel. A long time ago, the people of Earth plotted together to use their technology to build a huge tower, greater than anything ever built or imagined. They did it, of course, to show God that they are in control. God is so offended by their self-possessed arrogance that the people are scattered all over the face of the earth. Even their language is confused. There is no way they will be able to cooperate with one another in rebellion against their Creator.

And since that ancient time, humanity seems bound by ethnic and cultural conflict. You see it in our own country in the rise of white nationalism and racism that we had thought were behind us. You see it in the partisanship that pits neighbor

against neighbor, that pretends there are only two solutions to our problems – the right one and the wrong one.

But division is not the world as God originally intended it.

In Genesis, we're told that God created everything with an order to it, a balance, a unity, and called it "good." Later on, Jesus came to teach us more about that unity, how to really love our neighbors, how to reach out to people, all with the hope of bringing everyone back together to restore the original oneness of Creation.

I've heard it said that Pentecost (the coming of the Holy Spirit to the infant church) is the reverse of the Tower of Babel, healing the divisions set forth so long ago.

It takes place in Jerusalem, one of the most cosmopolitan cities of the ancient world. The city is filled with guests and foreigners arriving for the festival of Shavout, celebrating the giving of the original Law of God to Moses on Mount Sinai.

The followers of Jesus have been hanging out with one another in one place. Waiting. They're not sure for what, but they are wise enough to be prayerful. They're not strategizing what to do next; they are not setting goals and objectives with plans of action. They are just waiting for God to show up.

Suddenly, they are overwhelmed by God's Holy Spirit, which makes these simple Galileans head to the streets to preach and proclaim the Good News. Even more miraculously, everyone they speak with in Jerusalem understands them perfectly, in their own language. These people, under normal circumstances might be filled with mistrust of the "other" are hearing the disciples' joyful proclamation that we are all one.

Fire, wind, and humble country folk speaking in many languages were dramatic signs that God was doing a new thing. This wasn't just a magic trick for the disciples to perform, no – in this case, at that moment, "all flesh," male and female, old and young, slave and free, were invited and included and expected to use their spiritual gifts, whatever they might be! We are still given gifts from the Holy Spirit that we may use for the good of our neighbor, and the good of the Church and for the work of God in this place and in the world. Thanks be to God!