

SPIRIT'S SINEW

A Sermon on 1 Corinthians 12:1-11—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
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Last month my son Caleb took a field trip to the Mashantucket Pequot Museum in eastern Connecticut. This month he got to create a display of weapons the Pequots used: spear, bear trap, bow and arrow. My wife Ashley and I explained how well the Pequots used every part of the body of animals they killed, and were reminded how important sinews were to the livelihood of the tribe. Sinews are non-stretchy connective tissue and includes tendon, the tissue that connects muscle to bone. When it's dried out it looks like hay or some sort of thin telephone cord. Among other things, sinew were used by Pequots to secure arrowheads to shafts, as fishing line, and as the equivalent of thread, sewing objects together. It's no wonder then that due to its importance in the body and its binding capability, sinew also means strength and power, or sustaining force. We were at a loss to find sinew from any carcass in the neighborhood, so Caleb had to use twine instead for his project.

1.
When I reflect on today's Epistle reading, sinew comes to mind. Paul had embedded himself in the port city of Corinth and had preached the good news of this Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected, and brought together people from different backgrounds—Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews), women and men, poor and rich and everything in between. He helps them start a church, worshiping together, serving God together, but then he moves on to start another church elsewhere. A couple years later their faith community is almost coming apart at the seams. The sinew holding together seems to be in doubt. So they write Paul a letter asking for advice. One dilemma they face is whether to eat meat that

had been sacrificed to idols. Is this a problem? If we don't believe in the pagan gods it's not sacrilegious to eat it or does it make us bad followers of Jesus? Another bigger problem was the idea of spiritual gifts. After Paul's departure, some of the members of the church were claiming that their gifts and talents were more important than others'. In particular, later in the chapter Paul considers whether glossolalia, speaking in tongues, is more important than other gifts. Paul eventually comes down not on specifically identifiable gifts but the more abstract gift of love as the greatest, which is where we get "Love is patient, love is kind, it's not envious or boastful or rude...Love never ends...Faith hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

But Paul can only lift up love by first noting how our different gifts don't set us apart but, like sinew inside the body or on an arrow, bind us together.

I don't want you to be uninformed, he tells his friends in Christ, about spiritual gifts. Nobody can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit is out there bringing people to faith. There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; different things to do but one God who motivates you to do it. We are led by the Spirit to our specific ministries for the common good, for what's best for all—teachers, leaders, snow shovelers, choir members, deacons, ushers and greeters, you name it. All these gifts are activated by one and the same Spirit.

Lots to do, but one Spirit that inspires us toward Christian ministry. If you disagree on what's more important, you miss out on the reality that it all serves to give glory to God and the good news.

2.

Every fall this truth comes to mind when the church's budget process hits its stride. Some years the first draft of the budget might have a deficit, so it might be suggested around the budget meeting that we cut program budgets— Faith Formation/Christian Education, Music, youth groups, Outreach. There is usually that moment where the chairs of committees have to decide whether to go along with such small cuts or point their spiritual and budgetary guns at the other programs: 'But you can't cut OUR budget, we're too important! Look at how bloated THEIR budget is!' 'What's that make us, chopped liver?' Usually these moments end peacefully, with someone interjecting: 'Listen, we're all working toward the same goal to praise and serve God, we're all on the same team. Let's compromise.' And the sinew of the Spirit would coax us slowly to put our spiritual guns back into their holsters.

These days, I feel a real strengthening of the Spirit's sinews around here. This church spent some time during the Senior Pastor search to reflect on who we've been and what God calls us to be. Over the last year I've sat down and listened to church members talk about their hopes and dreams for this congregation, adding those discussions to my first thirteen years here as an Associate. And the most common themes I heard were how much our programs matter—our music, our outreach, our youth groups, our Christian Education Faith Formation. I've heard a yearning for those programs to work together more and to make sure they aren't underutilized, to invite more people to enter into Christian ministry through one or more of those programs.

The ministries of volunteers have reflected that. Our staff has been reflecting that. Our church leaders have been drawn together in by the Spirit's tether to see how our different ministries serve the same purpose, God's purpose, and that

God's purpose in large part is to bind us together as God's people, regardless of our different gifts or backgrounds. When our Music Minister Dan Brownell goes to St. John the Divine with the confirmation youth to share that experience with them, the Spirit is at work. When Christian sings with Linda, Robin, James, Amy, Dick and the band, the Spirit is binding us as one people. When members of the choir bring food for Jay Brothers' memorial service, it's evidence that the Spirit is sewing us together. When our Minister of Faith Formation suggests that we start a weekend food program for local kids and the Outreach ministry runs with Ashley and that idea, you're seeing the Spirit through them. When our young adults lead worship and the adults don't just tolerate them but truly listen for God through them, we can give credit to the Spirit. When I see fans of different presidential candidates and parties work together on a church project and not care about those differences, that's the strength and power of the Holy Spirit showing off. The Spirit makes us a stronger, unified, sinewy people. The Spirit of this church is strong in many ways.

I sense God calling us to stretch our invitation more and more to people beyond the borders of Milford because the Spirit has not only bound us together but also stretched us to see that there are people from Bridgeport to New Haven and everywhere in between to be members of a church that worships and works together in unity and love, offering programs for people of all ages and backgrounds.

3.

And yet we know that we and the Spirit have a lot more work to do. The Spirit continues to goad us into engaging the world and its crises with a genuine concern as brothers and sisters with all those who suffer and struggle. We are bound to all people, bound by the Spirit, draw by the Spirit's tether to care about and for one another.

With Bridgeport to our west and New Haven to our east, we can have joys for the culture and people in our big sister cities and concerns for some of the challenges faced in those cities. We can't insulate ourselves from our brothers and sisters just ten miles away. We are sewn together by the Spirit.

When we see news of police shootings of African Americans in Baltimore and Chicago, we can blame the young men shot or the ones who shot them, but we can also dig deeper into the dynamics outside the young men's control that put them in danger and the dynamics that strike fear in some police officers to shoot despite not always being in clear and immediate danger. That takes more time and that takes a commitment to the Spirit's sinew. It takes a willingness to sit across from someone different than you and to step into their shoes.

The dream of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., was that black and white children—and I add children of all ethnic backgrounds—might hold hands together, might be bound by the common purpose of reforming our country into one that honors our fellowship as citizens—or in Christian language, as God's children, Christ's siblings. It was King's dream that Americans, and especially Americans of faith, would meet the physical force of spears and guns with "soul force", with the peace that surpasses all understanding and can only be lived. Just as 53 years ago King noted that the freedom of white people is inextricably tied to the freedom of African Americans, so too today is our freedom bound together so that when an impoverished Latino girl in Bridgeport can't get a good education, we all suffer because of it.

In King's words: "We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back." This

was true in the American civil rights movement of 1963 and it applies to our life together today, that mere tolerance or worse apathy are not good enough for us to cultivate God's beloved community, for apathy or mere tolerance are stances that ignore how God sews us together to be God's people, together. In order to walk together in the Spirit, we must abide in that love that transcends all other gifts and compels us to use our other gifts for the common good and for the beloved community.

The spirit binds us as a congregation to do whatever we do—sing, teach, welcome, preach, serve, listen, pray—for the sake of God's kingdom. The spirit binds us together and turns us to see the vision of the beloved community, that common good that we can only approach through love. The force of the Spirit's sinew is stronger than resentment and hatred; the soul force surpasses the force of any bullet or blade.

God uses every part of Christ's body for the sake of the common good. Every part. Even the parts we understand least. We have different gifts, but they all come from the one Spirit and the one God in whose name we pray. Amen.