### “Any Spiritual Gift” Steve Finlan for The First Church, December 3, 2023

**Isaiah 64:1–5**

1O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— 2 as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! 3 When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 4 From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. 5You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways.

**1 Corinthians 1:3–10**

3Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, 5for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— 6just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— 7so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. 8He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

10 Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

Welcome to the First Sunday in Advent. Each Sunday in Advent has a theme: hope, joy, love, or peace. This week is for hope. We will also celebrate Christmas with our traditional Christmas Eve Lessons and Carols service.

Today our lessons shine a light on how God seems to have changed over time. But we know that God does not change; it is our human *understanding* of God that changes. Jesus really brought about a new understanding of God.

Let’s look at Third Isaiah’s idea of God expressed perhaps around 400 b.c. He wishes that God “would tear open the heavens and come down” (64:1), in order to frighten the nations and thunder forth judgment. He gets beyond the wishing and affirms that God “works for those who wait for him” (64:4); God *meets* them (64:5). This world-changing or apocalyptic thinking continues in the next chapter, where he speaks of a “new heavens and a new earth” (65:17), with a promise of a transformed world, “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox” (65:25).

New creation becomes a major theme at the end of Isaiah, and he heads on into an expansive, universalizing message from God in the last chapter: “I amcoming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory” (66:18). He will set his sign among Gentile nations and they will declare his glory (66:19). Finally, Isaiah culminates with a truly universalistic, that is, *worldwide*, hope: “All flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord” (66:23). The astounding implication is that the nations that come to believe in YHWH will no longer require the mediating service of Israel, because God will speak to them directly.

Admittedly, God in Isaiah 64 can be frightening. In later times, we have an image of a much more caring and repairing God in the 1 Corinthians reading. The Apostle Paul affirms a different kind of universalism there. Paul speaks of believers being “enriched in” Jesus, “in speech and knowledge of every kind” (1 Cor 1:5). His hope is for them to have every spiritual gift, to be strong and blameless (1:7–8). God shows his faithfulness by sending God’s Son, Jesus, and placing believers in fellowship with Jesus (1:9). With these spiritual gifts, there should be spiritual unity and not divisions among believers.

Paul is calling for practical and real unity in the spiritual community. This is how he begins this letter to a congregation about which he has many concerns, *especially* regarding their lack of unity. Unity of purpose I agree with, but *agreeing* to everything is a little harder. How do *you* feel when you hear someone telling you “I appeal to you . . . by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement” (1:10)?

It makes me want to rebel just a little, to say, “I will gladly be in fellowship and love, but do I have to always agree to every part? What if I don’t really agree with something? Can’t I have my own honest beliefs?” My view is that God allows us our own honest beliefs, and what he wants is not a clone-like agreement but respectfulness and spiritual unity. You can have unity with someone with whom you don’t fully agree. If you agree in seeking God’s will, in seeking to make love and justice prevail, then you can have spiritual unity, even if you disagree about exactly what justice would look like.

I think this ability to have spiritual unity without full agreement is actually one of the spiritual gifts Paul talks about. It could be called graciousness or respectfulness. And where does Paul get this? I think he gets it from Jesus, who strives to reduce infighting and competition among his apostles, and who displays tolerance for an outsider who is preaching in his name without being authorized by the apostles. The apostles complain about someone who is casting out demons in Jesus’ name, but who “does not follow with us” (Luke 9:49), and whom they try to stop. But Jesus says, “Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you” (9:50). And when the apostles are arguing among themselves “about who was the greatest,” Jesus sits them down and tells them “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:34–35).

So, it’s not universal agreement that Jesus is calling for, but spiritual tolerance and service motivation, leading to real spiritual unity. If we recognize spiritual motivation in another person, we can have spiritual unity with that person. He prayed to the Father that his disciples “may be one, as we are one . . . that they may become completely one” (John 17:11, 23). This is an enlightened view, with a deeper understanding of God, that Jesus shows us.

While this does not jive with Paul’s admonition that Christians all agree, it fully coincides with Paul’s insistence “that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1 Cor 1:10). People can have a unity of purpose and spiritual goals without sharing complete agreement in analysis and understanding.

Peter and Paul were not in complete agreement about how to spread the gospel message, but they were able to cooperate and make it work. Peter agreed with Paul’s teaching that Gentiles should not have to be circumcised to join the community (Acts 15:5–12). That was an essential point on which they needed to agree. They still had some disagreements (15:37–39), but they were able to continue spreading the gospel without any major division among them.

Paul will later write, of Jesus, that “in [him] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3), and I would add: in him is the secret of unity. We are “rooted and built up in him” (Col 2:7), and from that spiritual root comes our unity. We may have differing understandings about how to interpret the Bible or how to evangelize, but if we know that salvation and truth have come through Jesus, then we are connected to the same root; we are branches of the same vine. As Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit” (John 15:5).

This is a great spiritual gift, if we can realize our unity with other believers, knowing that we are rooted into the same vine. “Abide in my love” (John 15:9), he said. And, indeed, the universe’s foundation and construction is in *love*.

So, in Jesus, we find God much more approachable than the thundering God who frightens the nations. He wanted us to trust in God, without fear. He said “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32 RSV). Receive the kingdom! Plug in to the vine! As you imagine Jesus, you can understand God. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Receive spiritual gifts. Know that he will strengthen you to the end (1 Cor 1:7–8). Trust him who holds the treasures of wisdom. Base all your hope and trust in God’s faithfulness. Thanks be to God, who has brought the gift of Jesus into our lives.