

What Are Ye Made Of?

Isaiah 62:1-5; I Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11; Psalm 36:5-10 1-14-07

It is generally known that “little boys are made of snips and snails and puppy dog tails” while “little girls are composed of sugar and spice and everything nice.” I am sure we will all agree that this is quite true, with a few exceptions we might encounter as we travel through life.

Of course, if we look at the baser elements of our bodily composition we discover that little boys and little girls, as well as the larger variety, are made up of all sorts of elements that combine to create our cells, blood and guts. Water makes up seventy per-cent of our body weight and the element we have in most abundance, rumbling around within us, is oxygen.

In addition to the snips and snails, sugar and spice, water and oxygen we all possess, there are other qualities we share that make us human, in spite of color or creed or national origin. Such qualities are noted in Shylock’s famous speech from Shakespeare’s play, “The Merchant of Venice.”

In this speech Shylock compares Christians and Jews. I am sure many of us read this play at one time or another, and, perhaps, even memorized sections of it. “Portia’s speech comes to my mind readily. That will remain for another time.

For our purposes this morning, we will take a look at Shylock. He says: “Hath not a Jew eyes? Has not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal’d by the same means, warm’d and cool’d by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?” (The Merchant of Venice, Act III, scene I)

All humans are made of this same stuff whether it is raw elements or passions, affections or senses. Perhaps, we need to remember this in a world torn apart by the ability we seem to have to focus on what it is that makes us different and separate, instead of studying what it is that makes us the same and what should unite us.

In our reading from the Gospel of John, we see Jesus, a person who had all of our human elements and qualities, performing what we are told is the first of his miracles-- changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana. He performed this miracle in response to a request from his mother. The ability to perform such a miracle sets Jesus apart from us. It was a gift from God. Most likely the gift of the ability to perform miracles was granted to him to help him show that he was the son of God but also because he was so closely attuned to God’s will for him and his life. Often he played down the ability he had to perform miracles so that he would be allowed to go about his Father’s work quietly. But within him was this gift. A spiritual gift.

Paul reminds us in our reading from I Corinthians for this morning that we all have differing spiritual gifts.

Paul wrote a few letters to the church at Corinth, a place where he spent much time—about 18 months. It was a church that often found itself in turmoil within, while resisting the forces that threatened its existence from without.

Corinth was a huge maritime and commercial city in its day. It is estimated that there were 600,000 residents. It had a diversity of problems as well as a diversity of religions. It was considered a city of vice.

It is thought that Paul wrote four letters to the followers of Christ living there to strengthen their resolve so that they could resist all the temptations that surrounded them. Two of the original letters have been lost or partially absorbed into the two letters we have in our Bible.

A major problem the church always seemed to confront within was being able to work together. This is not a new or old story. In any community different personalities and ego needs can make life challenging. Paul wanted people to recognize that spiritual gifts were as vital to the survival of the church as were any other gifts. But, in spite of him and his efforts, there were those who believed that their gifts were better than the gifts others possessed. In attempting to counter this belief Paul puts emphasis on the fact that the Spirit grants these gifts and, because of this, they are equal in value.

Some thought that the ability to speak in tongues had more importance than any other gift. Speaking in tongues is “the ecstatic utterance of emotionally agitated religious persons, consisting of a jumble of disjointed and unintelligible sounds.” People who speak in tongues believe this is a spontaneous gift and one that is on the highest level of spiritual gifts. Paul tells those who believed so, that this is wrong. Whatever gift has been received from the Spirit is to be used for the common good, never for the glorification of any one individual or a group of them. A bit later in this letter, Paul offers guidelines that require that someone present be able to understand and interpret what was being said by a speaker in tongues. . He tried to steer people away from looking to just a few people to supply leadership for the community because of their spectacular ways.

While all gifts do not manifest themselves in the same way and with the same strength, they are all valuable in enriching the community and in building the kingdom of God. Where would we be without those who have the capacity to speak with wisdom or knowledge? Where would we be without those who can heal rifts or work some sort of miracles? Without those who act as prophets of warning and peace? Without those who take the time to see the gifts others have and to encourage them in their development? These people are all around and among us at all times. We need to just slow down a bit and observe.

Of course Paul’s letter speaks to us as it did to that early church. It especially speaks to us as Congregationalists who recognize that the leadership of the local church belongs to all members of the congregation. This requires that we become sensitive to the gifts others have and that we realize that all gifts used in the service of God and our community of faith, for the betterment of all, are to be valued. Of course, this also requires that we all try to understand one another and that we practice a lot of patience. It requires that we all understand we are made of the same stuff ranging from those snips and snails and that sugar and spice down to the things that make us all human and all different. But as different as we may appear we all are the treasured children of God, granted love and forgiveness and a good measure of spiritual gifts, which we are to use in service to God and for the expansion of the kingdom. Amen