

## Our Pride Problem

Delivered on Epiphany 2  
Trinity Anglican Church, Lebanon, NH  
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Today's reading is excised from what is really a literary unit that extends from the first verse of chapter 12 to the end of chapter 14. Our particular reading does pretty well standing alone; but we should remember that it often helps to get a little context to help flesh out a passage under consideration.

Paul is concerned with spiritual gifts in chapters 12-14, this is obvious. But he is probably even more concerned with their proper purpose: building up the church of Christ. That is why chapter 13, which immediately follows after the last verse we read this morning, is concerned with love. Without love, that desire to build others up, the gifts God has given us can be misused and lead to divisions.

Paul's discussion breaks down into three parts corresponding with the three chapters. Chapter 12 treats the diversity within unity with respect to the operations of the various spiritual gifts. Chapter 13 points to love as the foundational virtue of believers, that which is the vehicle through which gifts can operate beneficially. Chapter 14 stresses the primacy of edification in the exercise of spiritual gifts.

Though the Corinthian church had some real strengths, it was threatened by schisms. What was at the root of the Corinthian church's difficulties? Well, the obvious answer is sin. But can we elaborate? To be more specific, we should say their problems stemmed from pride, which in the Christian tradition is seen as the very root of sin. But maybe we need to examine this more critically.

For it seems that many Christians—and the vast majority of non-believers as well—might say that they don't feel particularly prideful, seeing that as another word for arrogant. And people don't generally like being around arrogant people and don't consider themselves that way. I'm sure that many of us here today would readily admit to various less than Christian thoughts and behaviors; yet we don't see ourselves as arrogant. Most of us believe we entertain a realistic view of ourselves that may allow for proper self-respect, but not arrogance or conceit. After all, prideful or arrogant people are cocky, obnoxious, and way too self-assured. There are a lot of people who don't fall into that category, at least as far as we can tell. So if many today see pride this way, why has the Church traditionally seen it as the evil of evils?

Let us hear C.S. Lewis's words on this matter:

It was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: It is the complete anti-God state of mind. Does this seem to you exaggerated? If so, think it over. I pointed out a moment ago that the more pride one had, the more one disliked pride in others. In fact, if you want to find out how proud you are the easiest way is to ask yourself, 'How much do I dislike it when other people snub me, or refuse to take any notice of me, or shove their oar in, or patronize me, or show off?' The point is that each person's pride is in competition with every one else's pride...Pride is essentially competitive—is competitive by its very nature... We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If someone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone.

On Lewis's understanding, competitiveness seems to be a key aspect of pridefulness. But what about all the quiet, rather submissive people? What about those who are not throwing their weight around or trying to garner all the attention? What of the wallflowers? This is a good question. Maybe pride in most of us is more subtle, more hidden than that displayed by the person who is too full of himself or a show-off. We could see it as excessive self-focus and a deep desire

that our wills prevail. It is what we all suffer from if we are honest. We are anxious about our worth and our well-being. We want, we truly *need* certain things and we have to make sure we get them.

Do you see what is already happening? Pride is our desire to secure our worth *without any reference to God*. We need to deal with our finitude, our creatureliness, our anxiety, without trusting in God. And so pride requires a lot of self-concern, a focus on what will enable me to maintain my project of self-justification and self-validation and keep at bay whatever, or whoever, might threaten that. So even the person who is self-effacing, who is always looking to serve, has a pride system operating that he or she might be unaware of. Even for someone whose goal is self-erasure is, on some level, *proud* of his or her achievement in this regard. They don't have the self-forgetfulness that comes with true humility; rather, they are still focused on the self they so want to be, that self that is truly worthy in and of itself.

So pride is not always manifested in trying to one-up someone on the ball field or the business world. It is still operating even in those who are always in the background. Some kind of self-exaltation is at work in those not truly born of the Spirit, those who cannot really take their eyes off themselves for very long.

It has been said many times that as long as you are proud you cannot know God. How could you? To truly know Him you have to know that you are nothing in comparison, and that your salvation consists not in getting Him to notice you, but in trusting Him for your significance rather than yourself. You have to take your eyes off yourself and what you want or claim you *need* in order to live a worthwhile life. You need to confess your pridefulness and admit that it has blocked out God and kept you cut off from others.

This is a tall order and really requires grace. It is something beyond the ability of fallen human nature. We must allow God to tear down the walls of the little fortress we have built in our attempts to secure ourselves against our finitude and fear of insignificance. Is it any surprise that pride builds walls between people rather than bridges? Proudful people live in a gated community of One. It is very exclusive. It excludes all who would dare undermine its desire to justify itself, most particularly God.

So does this lengthy excursus on pride make it seem any more likely to us that we do suffer from it just as the Corinthians did? Might it reside in your heart as it resides in mine? If it appears that that might be the case after all, let us return to 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12.

As you recall, there were divisions within the Corinthian church that were serious enough to merit a long treatment by St. Paul. What lay at the root was a belief by some in the church that speaking in tongues was an indication of who was truly spiritual or even who was an authentic Christian at all. Those who didn't have this ability were second class, or worse, superfluous. So we see the issue of *status* appearing front and center. "I am justified because I can speak in tongues." The belief was well-entrenched in the Corinthian church that speaking in tongues was a sign of true spirituality and so any who could not must not have been truly spiritual. Paul is writing to correct that misunderstanding.

As he lays out so beautifully in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13, true spirituality consists in love of the brethren and a desire to build them up. Those who are proud of their gifts, as many in the Corinthian church were, only wish to build themselves up. They cannot take their focus off of themselves for any length of time at all. They are not truly able to love others. But without love, what are we as a church? The answer is: just another club, a collection of people focusing on themselves and seeking to build only themselves up. If the church is just a voluntary association,

a collection of like-minded people finding it advantageous to band together, then the pride system that governs all of those living by the flesh will stay intact. And they will not move any closer toward true intimacy with God or with others. But if the Church is truly the Body of Christ here on earth, a Spirit-infused organism that is central to His redemptive plan, then a new way of being will be required of those inhabiting it.

Just as Christ counted equality with God not something to be grasped, those who truly follow Him likewise must give up their desires to be at the center of things and just let go of that self-justification project. This project was begun by Lucifer and has plagued mankind since the beginning. We now just call it “human nature.” But the founding of the Church inaugurates a new humanity, one that can rest secure in God and be free from this tyranny of having to secure an identity that can stand apart from God. We can be free from the futility of trying to deny our creature-hood and become as God, attempting to find total security in our own self-approval.

If we can accept that we are prideful creatures in need of redemption, then we can begin entering fully into that life in the Body of Christ that God has always desired for us. We all have a place in that body, we all have gifts we are meant to exercise. We are all important to God and his plan for this lost world. There are no second-class Christians. There is only one kind: those who are moving away from habitual self-focus and self-justification and toward full trust in God, in whom only true peace is found.

So let us heed Paul’s words: “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.” There is no part of this Body that is expendable, that doesn’t require concern. We all need the other parts of the body—that is how God created us. We were designed for intimacy, to care

and to be cared for. If that makes you uncomfortable, then that is your pride system talking. Repent of it and move toward others in love. If you don't admit your pride and allow God to cure you of it, you will not be able to be a blessing to others, nor will you truly rest in God.

Most of what Paul is saying in these three chapters can be summarized thusly: "Get out of your own way and care—truly care—for your brothers and sisters. They are important to God and they should be important to you. Put their welfare before yours. Share their suffering and share their triumphs. Whatever gifts you have, use them to edify others in the Body. Because if you are not building up the body of Christ, what exactly are you doing?"

God has made some of us teachers, some administrators, some healers, and some even can speak in tongues. But all of these gifts are to be used to build up the Body and to glorify God. Self-glorification is right out. So look to your left and look toward your right. There is someone who needs an encouraging word from you. What are you going to do about it?