

**Sermon – Saturday, January 15, 2022**

**Rev. Randi**

Psychologists tell us that we tend to love those people familiar to us.<sup>i</sup> We gain a sense of safety among the familiar and the predictable. We also prefer people who are like us.<sup>ii</sup> Finding people who think like us and act like us seems to build confidence in ourselves and our feelings. We also tend to be willing to risk liking someone we feel will like us in return. Subconsciously, we think familiar and similar people are more likely to like us back.

This tendency toward loving the familiar and similar can sometimes cause trouble in the church. God intends for the church to be a collection of people who are different. The church's mission is to spread the Gospel and minister to the community's needs in Jesus's name. To do that, we need people with different perspectives, different backgrounds, different life paths, and different gifts. For example, we need people in the church who can organize, empathize, welcome, keep us on the right track spiritually, understand money, make others feel better, and call us to evangelism. We need people who have mainly led conservative, conforming lives and those who have come to God through more wandering paths. We need people who talk a lot and people who listen well. We need all these gifts and perspectives. And we need to be able to sit down together, pray, and decide what we will do as a community of faith together. Once we've decided what we will do, we then determine what each person will contribute toward that common goal based on the gifts God has given them. We need to fight against the urge to listen only to those who think like us or who we most associate with. God has led each person into our community for a reason. Being able to do the ministry we're called to as a congregation depends upon listening to and working collaboratively with everyone.

We also need to honor the gifts we've each been given. To do that, we first understand what a gift really is. Society has changed the way it looks at gifts. Seldom do we really receive a true gift in society. At Christmas, most of us exchange gifts, which means that we give to those who also give to us. When we receive gifts that aren't part of an exchange, it's often because of some achievement – for example, we receive graduation gifts because we finished our schooling. Spiritual gifts are different. We receive them because God has chosen to give them to us. They are provided to us – the baptized-- to be used within a community of faith for the common good. We didn't do anything to earn them. They aren't given for us to hoard for our own benefit.

We also need to recognize that every gift is equal. That's hard to realize today. Society tends to value some gifts more than others – we can see that in how society compensates certain professions more than others even if they require similar training or education. We also tend to think some gifts are more valuable than others in churches too. We become envious because God gave someone else a gift we perceive as more important than the gift God gave us. Or, if we have what we consider a higher gift, we sometimes are proud. We think that gift was given to us because we are more special than others. Attitudes such as envy or pride distract us from using our gifts for

the common good. Using our gifts for the common good means that we use them for the benefit of everyone – the whole church, the whole community, and the whole world. We need to be humble, cooperative, nonjudgmental, and open to using our gifts in the way that God intends.

Here's a scenario to consider. A congregation is trying to discern one primary ministry it can undertake to benefit the community. It chooses a committee to consider this question. While the tendency would be to select people whose life experiences are similar and who all hang out together as part of the church "in-crowd," God would have us actively search for those who might bring a different perspective to this committee. God would have us listen to all perspectives.

Once the committee decides upon a ministry, God would have every person in the church contribute to this ministry. Each will contribute differently but equally. Some will be blessed financially and will give money. Others will be blessed with hospitality and contribute through parties or welcoming events. Some will be administrators. Others will encourage the administrators. Some will bring music into the ministry. The ministry would be incomplete without the gifts of everyone. It also will be lopsided if one or two people do everything while the rest of the congregation remains on the sidelines. EVERY PERSON has a gift that we need to do the bold ministry to which God has called our congregation.

Today's collect reads as follows:

Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world: Grant that **your people**, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

We all --- each of us – are illumined by the Word and Sacraments of Jesus. We are all created by God and baptized by water and the Holy Spirit. When WE shine with the radiance of God's glory, WE make Christ known and worshipped.

When we each share our experiences, backgrounds, and gifts in community – and when we all listen to and honor that sharing – our congregation becomes the beacon of light that Jesus intends.

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<sup>i</sup> Lumen: Introduction to Psychology – Attraction and Love <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/wmopen-psychology/chapter/prosocial-behavior/>

<sup>ii</sup> Psychology Today: Why Do We Like People Who Are Similar to Us? <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/close-encounters/201812/why-do-we-people-who-are-similar-us>