

January 19, 2025

Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey

"The Spirit and the Saxifrage"

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

"The hardiest plant in the world is the purple saxifrage. It has delicate-looking flowers, with purple petals that seem as though they might blow away in the wind, yet it thrives in the Arctic. The flowers survive by clustering together, low to the ground, offering each other shelter against the hardest conditions on earth."

These words were penned by Matt Haig, in a book he wrote to comfort himself and others. I pick it up when I need a word of comfort. I picked it up recently on a bitterly cold day, when I was feeling a bit like a purple petal that might blow away in the wind. It's not hard to see where Haig is going with this. He wants us to fashion a metaphor out of the survival tactics of the purple saxifrage. The world is a harsh place. Find your people and hunker down. It reminded me of the Irish proverb - "It is in the shelter of each other that people live."

Haig's metaphor is more than mere comfort. It contains real insight, insight not unlike that dispensed by Paul in his meditation on spiritual gifts. He celebrates the assortment of gifts the Spirit pours out upon the people of God. Wisdom and knowledge, faith and healing, powerful deeds, prophecy, discernment. These might sound highfalutin to our ears, but we know these gifts well. The grandmother who slipped wisdom between wisecracks. The uncle who taught you how to change the oil in your truck. The sister whose faith was unshaken even when the bottom dropped out from beneath her feet. The friend who insisted on bringing you chicken soup when you were sick. The congregation that raised well over twenty-five thousand dollars to ensure their unhoused neighbors would have access to shelter on a day like today.

There is no end to the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. The Spirit is fabulously creative, pouring out gifts that are shaped just right to meet needs. Tomorrow, we remember and give thanks for the extraordinary gifts of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose vision, leadership, and preaching were catalysts for the civil rights movement. But it's not just the extra special people that get gifts. It's Oprah up in here. You get a gift. You get a gift. Everybody gets a gift: *To*

each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. It's such a feel-good scripture. We should send it to Matt Haig for Volume Two of the *Comfort Book*.

It's good timing because I think it goes without saying that many of us are a little tense right now. And yet, it's almost painful to hear that phrase "common good." These days, the idea of a commonly held good is quaint, even outlandish. Our culture is so divided, and our country is so polarized. It's arctic out there, friends. The wind is blowing so hard the "feels like" temperature is well below zero in more ways than one.

Padraig O' Tuama, an Irish poet, notes the ambiguity of that Irish proverb. It can also be translated like this: It is in the shadow of each other that people live. And boy if this isn't true. People cast long, dark shadows that leave one another shivering in the cold: shadows of distrust, animosity, hatred. When it's all shadow and no shelter, the purple petals of the saxifrage are lost. When the common good goes extinct and the gifts of the Spirit atrophy from disuse, scapegoating becomes a blood sport, apathy becomes a coping mechanism, and loneliness becomes a way of life.

It's enough to make you feel a little hopeless along the perimeter, a little helpless around the edges. But we need not resign ourselves to hopelessness or helplessness, because by the power of the Holy Spirit we can confess that Jesus is Lord. We can pray for the courage to be faithful stewards of the gifts that Spirit has activated in our midst.

Now, I realize this might come as something of a surprise, but biblical commentaries are rarely laugh out loud funny. But this week, a recently published reflection on this section of 1 Corinthians used a metaphor that made me giggle. The author reflected on the similarity between the ministry that spirit-led communities are called to do, and the dreaded group project. Many if not most students sigh when their teachers assign these collaborative learning experiences. Straight A students are at the mercy of kids who would rather be anywhere than history class - rolling their eyes with the sure and certain knowledge that they'll end up carrying the whole group, just like they always do. Kids who would rather

be anywhere than history class stand in judgment of the straight A students who won't give them a chance, so why bother trying?

The author acknowledged that she was the type with "an at times unhealthy need to pull [her] own weight and others' weight too," such that group projects often left her feeling "drained, frustrated, and resentful." And then there's the disaster you have on your hands when members of the group butt heads over which ideas to implement. What then?

My giggle turned to a groan when the author went on to drop the observation that the pandemic was the worst group project of all time. I hadn't thought of it that way, but boy if it isn't true. I reckon the second worst group project ever is trying to figure out how to navigate this era in which the country has divvied itself up into ideological camps, complete with team colors.

But here we are: Team Church. Here we huddle up, seeking comfort, seeking survival, seeking the manifestation of the spirit for the common good. Here we are, proclaiming the only words capable of transcending every barrier, rescuing every scapegoat, and healing every wound: Jesus is Lord. These are the words we need for all the tricky group projects before us.

To be clear, Team Church doesn't huddle solely for our own sake any more than the saxifrage clusters for its own survival. I'm not sure people believe me when I tell them how nerdy I am. Once the purple saxifrage activated my spiritual gift of nerdery, I couldn't turn it off if I tried. Purple saxifrage - sometimes called french knot moss - makes critical contributions to the complex ecology of the Arctic. In that harshest of climates, the purple saxifrage is a godsend for vulnerable bumblebees and butterflies. Without that early April nectar, those winged wonders would go hungry. Creation tips toward the common good.

Padraig O'Tuama took that Irish Proverb and spun it into a poem. Or maybe it's a prayer. It's probably both. Here it is.

"It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.
It is in the shadow of each other that the people live.

We know that sometimes we are alone,
and sometimes we are in community.
Sometimes we are in shadow,
and sometimes we are surrounded by shelter.
Sometimes we feel like exiles –
in our land, in our languages and in our bodies.
And sometimes we feel surrounded by welcome.
As we seek to be human together,
may we share the things that do not fade:
generosity, truth-telling, silence, respect and love.
And may the power we share
be for the good of all.
We honour God, the source of this rich life.
And we honour each other, story-full and lovely.
Whether in our shadow or in our shelter,
may we live well
and fully
with each other.”

Amen.