
The Finite Holds the Infinite¹

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Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

—1 Corinthians 12: 4-13

The finite holds the infinite. It is part of what St. Paul said to the people of Corinth. “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...” One Holy Spirit, given to us at baptism forms us, shapes us, makes us one body. In the Diaconal Litany we pray “Make our whole lives a living from and returning to that holy font.”

The Holy Spirit, the infinite, is ours forever. As the **Evangelical Lutheran Worship** baptismal service says: “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.” We, the finite, get to hold the infinite Spirit. One piece of what we do today is celebrate that infinite Spirit that was in Gwen.

In the text from 1 Corinthians, St. Paul tells us that a variety of gifts make up the body of Christ. It is a text that the Holy Spirit worked in Gwen. It is a text that seems clearer to us because we knew Gwen. As Lisa told some of the stories about Gwen, we heard the ways she continued to stretch the world to know what “all the baptized” means.

1. Preached at the funeral of the Rev. Dr. Gwen Sayler for the Memorial Eucharist on November 16, 2019, in the Loehe Chapel of Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa. Pastor Anita Mohr was in deaconess formation with Prof. Sayler in the Lutheran Diaconal Association class of 1971.

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St. Paul said, “Jews or Greeks, slaves or free.” Surely Gwen would add male or female as St. Paul did in other writings. It was the gift of Gwen at Concordia Seminary, where they were prepared to train males. Gwen lived before them as a reality they were not ready to acknowledge; females needed to find their own bathrooms. Or there was the day that Gwen and Lorinda Schwartz walked out of an Annual Meeting after ten long years of debate and heartache about men in an all-female diaconate and came back with an agreement that affirmed the infinite variety of gifts given in baptism for all men and women together!

It was the gift of Gwen who came out not so that she could have a sexual relationship but so that others could. Hey, St. Paul: “Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, male or female, heterosexual or LGBTQIA+.” It was Gwen who hula-hooped so that children might know the grace of God. It was Gwen who walked student after student through this seminary. Hey, St. Paul: “Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, male or female, heterosexual or LGBTQIA+, children or adults, those who learn languages and write papers easily and those who struggle.” Read Gwen’s Facebook page and see how many former students wrote about how Gwen walked them through this place.

Gwen never forgot North Dakota or her family. How many students are open to God’s call but not to North Dakota? Gwen knew that the body of Christ was in North Dakota, as well as her family whom she loved and cared for despite the distance. Nephews went on trips. Gifts were sent. Laughter was shared. Christmas trips were made, or at least attempted. Hey, St. Paul: “Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, male or female, heterosexual or LGBTQIA+, students with all kinds of abilities, big metro churches or little churches on the prairie, seminary professor or family member.” The infinite Spirit of God calls, gathers, and enlightens the variety of gifts in all the baptized.

This has been the Holy Spirit's work in Gwen—finding ways to stretch the world to know the Holy Spirit's work—finding the infinite in the finite. The Advent wreath she bought at the 100th anniversary celebration is an example. It was made from the bunk beds of Deaconess Hall. Deaconess Hall, the finite, taught us the infinite gift of community and the blessing of prayer, where Gwen played balloon volleyball in the hall during the study break that she scheduled, and where the Class of '71 first met at age 19.

Gwen kept bidding for an Advent wreath until it reached \$850 because she cherished what it stood for—and because Gwen hated losing. The infinite made the bidding turn into two \$850 donations to the Lutheran Diaconal Association. Another wreath is being made. The Holy Spirit, the infinite was in that place.

We mourn today because the infinite Spirit was in Gwen who was finite. Thank you, God, for the gift of Gwen who reminds us that we, finite beings, have been baptized to hold the infinite for the sake of the world!

Amen.

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