Over the weeks of this short green season following the Epiphany and leading us into the Transfiguration, we will hear parts of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians.

They were small communities of early Jesus followers … those who were committed to offering their lives and their ways, their choices and world view to the beginnings of what would become the Christian faith, of what would become gathered assemblies of believers and doubters and seekers all over the world.

They were people of the resurrection. People who believed Jesus had already broken the bonds of sin and death. People who dared to live in that truth even though so much of the world remained enticed by “idols that could not speak.” (1 Corin 12:2)

They were people who sensed God’s Spirit breaking into this world through baptismal waters, through the Feast of Love at the Lord’s Table, through the teachings of Jesus and the acts of service and compassion those teachings called out of them.

And they were struggling … As time went on the brokenness and fallibility of humanity entered these faith communities too. Different leaders had come in after Paul and, as happens with humans, some people felt connection with one leader over another. There were different opinions on how communion should be conducted. People grouped together in cliques, often based on common interests or similar gifts of the Spirit. And people aligned over shared complaints, judgment and insecurities too.

The Corinthians were dealing with some issues that are not familiar to us or do not align with Christian theology where *we* stand in this evolving religion. For one thing, it’s important to remember that Paul and the people of those early Christian communities believed Jesus was coming back at any minute, probably by next week for sure. If that is your overarching certainty, it changes the way people behave and understand the world around them.

I am reminded of a movie I once caught bits and pieces of – it was an apocalyptic tale about a meteor racing toward earth. In the end, there was nothing the earthlings could do except resign to the fact that the end was coming, and they knew precisely what time. As that reality dawned upon the earthlings, it brought out the very best and the very worst in people.

Paul is dealing with matters like that in the Corinthians.

We should also remember this is just the beginning of Christianity. People are just starting to suss out what the Christian Church would profess and practice. There was no creed yet. There weren’t the lectionaries, doctrines or liturgies that would eventually bring cohesiveness and orthodoxy to Christianity.

And so, in some very important and culturally dominant ways, we are quite different Jesus-following people today.

Do not worry though, there are plenty of similarities that make Paul’s Corinthian correspondence mirrors for us – We can see ourselves in this reflection.

For one thing, these house churches were small. We, as individual assemblies, are small these days too, thanks to many factors.

The Corinthians were also experiencing division, something people of any age can relate to. We like to name and categorize things … I think we do it naturally. In reading our creation stories, one might say we were created, in part, to name the world around us. From Genesis, “…out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to (Adam) to see what he would call them; and whatever (he) called each living creature, that was its name.” (Gen. 2:19)

It’s a great strength in a lot of ways – this innate naming ability. And I’ll tell you a great piece of wisdom named for me during my summer as a hospice chaplain: the flip side of a strength is often what challenges us most. The flip side of being creatures who name and categorize is that we can easily divide and make judgments about what is better … what is more Godly, more important, more necessary.

There are other ways, I’m sure, we can find ourselves reflected in aspects of the Corinthian communities. I’ll mention just one more that really struck me, and that is that they are dealing with a lot. It must have felt like moving mountains to them at times, just as all the challenges we face today can feel like mountains – waning attendance and engagement in our ministries, many opinions about worship style, divisions, burn out, sustainability, unclear and likely shifting mission and purpose. As the church, we have been weathering huge doses of change. And now, all topped off with a pandemic. Mountains, indeed.

But here’s the thing we also see in that Corinthian mirror. The Corinthians faced mountains of challenge and we are still here. They did not fail … they flourished – we are proof of that. It was a mess at times, we can be sure of that. There was probably need at many points for repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and fresh start in the journey of the early church. I’m certain it was very hard … there is constant unlearning and re-learning in the journey of a Christian. None of that is easy for us. Still, from those small and tenuous beginnings, they prevailed. Christ’s Church prevailed.

Because we’re not in charge. God is in charge, as Paul helps us remember. Specifically, God as the person of Jesus Christ and whose continual presence in the world is activated by Holy Spirit is in charge. And so, like the Corinthians, with that powerhouse leading us, Christ’s Church still flourishes on earth – despite our tinkering, our sin, or even our reluctance.

Spiritual gifts are one of the big divides in the community at Corinth. They are ranking these gifts, and along with them, the people who possess these gifts of the Spirit. So, Paul comes with this corrective teaching on what it means to live in Jesus-following community. I think it’s worth noting that he starts by taking his siblings in Christ back to the root of it all. It is not them who create and distribute these gifts. It is God. And although there are different kinds of gifts, each and every one of them is breathed into life or activated by the Holy Spirit, making each gift an individual offers to the community a sacred and holy contribution.

And, Paul reminds them, these gifts and contributions to the community are not given for the glory and benefit of the person who bears them. They are not meant to propel one person or one small group of people to elite or superstar status in the community. “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (v 7)

Now that is a countercultural idea still, my friends … perhaps something to consider deeply in this short green season. In this very individualistic Western culture of ours, what does that mean to think of community before individual?

What Paul is saying is that the reader who comes up here during our worship to bring us the Word offers a gift as sacred as the one who comes in to set the paraments or prepare the Table and Font … Is as sacred as the one who picks up laundry for the PADS ministry and the one who helps steward our finances … Is as sacred as the one who serves on council and the one who listens and comforts and prays with another. All of it done for the sake of the community as a whole, not individual glory or boasting or martyrdom.

We will hear more of this picture of Christian Community Paul offers us in the weeks to come.

I have one more thing to say this week, and it is about the gifts the Spirit has activated in each of us for the common good.

On Wednesday night I had a chance to do Dwelling in the Word on this text. Dwelling in the Word is a simple and powerful way of gathering around the bible in community. If you want to know more, come and talk to me, I’m happy to Dwell with you.

So, Wednesday … I was surprised at how many of those gathered around this bible reading said they didn’t identify with any of these gifts – they weren’t sure they had any gifts at all. I’ve been thinking about that ever since. I wonder how we might name these Spiritual Gifts today?

Here are some possibilities that came to mind. (Not an exhaustive list)

The utterance of wisdom and knowledge is the gift activated in those of us who share the story of the Risen Christ, who share experiences and wrestle with scripture in community.

The gift of healing might be seen activated in those who help feed us from the Lord’s Table, since we are healed in that act. And since the abundance we receive at this table is meant to spill out into the world, it is the Spirit who is activating those who bring a meal to someone who is ill, or volunteer to help feed our PADS guests on Monday nights.

I think of a very personal experience when it comes to those with the gift of miracles. It was the day I really doubted whether I should be in seminary, only to find a note of encouragement in my mailbox from a member of my church. That miracle made every difference in the world to me that day and each day since.

Discernment of the spirit is alive and well in those who ask questions like “What would Jesus do?” or “How does this serve common good?”

The gift of faith I see in each of us, actually – especially as we pass the faith on to children and grandchildren, friends and family through sacrament and Christian living.

And prophecy. I’ll finish with this story. Often, we think here of people who preach. The Spirit has clearly activated that gift among some of us here at Shepherd. And, it’s not always so noticeable – like the prophet who was here in this sanctuary a little more than a week ago.

I had come in that morning to teach the preschoolers. The holidays were over, in my mind and on my task list. I had more than moved on from Christmas and the Christ child. That morning we were talking about the bible story of Joshua. And I wanted to teach the kids a song that fits well in the season after Epiphany. This Little Light of Mine … we are the light of Christ in the world, I told them. People can follow our light and find Jesus, just like how the Magi followed the star to Bethlehem and found Jesus.

I had started teaching them the song, when a sweet little three-year-old voice interrupted. “Do you know what song I like to sing at home?” she asked me? I said, “Which song?”

“Go Tell it on the Mountain,” she said.

It was the song I had taught them the month before.

And in that one statement, the little prophet reminded me of the astounding news of the Christ child we had all just shared, which I had already buried under mountains of other tasks and concerns for the seasons of the church coming up, annual meetings, year-end reports, when would the DMV open again … all kinds of things.

This little Epiphany prophet took me back to the root of it all. Mountains, indeed, … mountains that can tumble to mere rubble at the words of even the tiniest prophet among us, activated by the Spirit, to the Glory of God and for the common good. Amen.