

Living into the Questions: Needs or Assets?
1Cor 12:4-13
November 4, 2018
First Baptist Church, Pottstown

I spent Friday morning doing a house inspection at what is soon to be my new home in Collegeville. It was a fascinating and educational experience! For more than three hours, I followed Mark, the inspector, around the townhome I am in the midst of purchasing, looking into every nook and cranny, opening and closing every door, flushing toilets, shining flashlights into dark places, crawling into other spaces, looking behind, under and over things, running water, turning on and off light switches, heating units, ceiling fans and appliances! Together we noted every little thing: there's a stain here and a wobbly thing there. This is too loose and this is too tight. This wire isn't attached correctly and this hand rail is needs to be fixed. This switch is connected to this outlet and this window opens this way. We took pictures and made copious notes as we moved from floor to floor, room to room. It seemed like there was no end to the things we were "calling out". I began to wonder what I had gotten myself into! It wasn't until we finished up in the loft on the 4th floor, and he declared that he was done, that I dared to ask, "Well, Mark, what do you think? Is this a good house?" With a big smile on his face he declared, "Oh yes, I think it's a *great house!* *Nothing major* wrong here at all! Just a bunch of little things that "anyone" can fix!"

What a relief! As I drove from there to the church I reflected on the fact that for more than 3 hours we had focused only on the *negative* things; in fact, our job was to *look* for them, to hunt them down, to ferret them out, to note and record them with camera and paper. Our task was to see what was **wrong**, what was missing, what was unsafe. And the fact that we

discovered that the furnace is only two years old, there has never been water damage of any kind, the carpet's in great shape, the counter tops are new was only an afterthought. All the things that were *right* with the place, had been pushed to the background until he declared, "it is a great house!" Only then did I begin to remember why I had been attracted to it in the first place.

It seems to me to be human nature to see what is wrong rather than what is right. We look in the mirror and judge ourselves: too fat, too thin, too old, too young, too tall, too short; do you ever look in the mirror just to say to yourself: "you're looking marvelous today! Don't you look perfect just the way you are?!" I sometimes think we critique ourselves more harshly than we judge others. Where we can give others a pass ("they can't help that; they are doing the best they can"), we seldom afford ourselves the same grace. It's easier to point out the flaws than to see the good.

Of course, the same is true for our church. We look around us and we start the critique: not enough people, not enough money, not enough energy. We've got more building than we can deal with, and less people than we can work with. We've got tenants, not partners; we've got chores, not meaningful ministry. We've got a parking lot that collects trash, a building we can't heat, Sunday school classrooms that sit empty, pledges that go unfulfilled. There is every reason in the world to be overwhelmed, to feel discouraged, to wonder if we just shouldn't sell the whole dog-gone place and be done with it. Our city reflects similar problems magnified; the world, worse. A "home inspection" of our physical and spiritual reality just might offer us the perspective we need, the kind of perspective Paul gives us in his word to the Corinthians then, and to us today.

“Now there are a variety 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.”

What is Paul doing here? He’s wrapping up a “home inspection”! After addressing the needs of the church and assessing the practicality of the problems at hand, Paul persuades them to focus, *not* on what they lack but **what they have**; not on what is missing but **what is present**. Like the home inspector who notes every picky, negative thing but declares it a “great house!”, Paul’s moves from calling them out to inviting them forward—forward with the power of the gifts God has given them, already present and ready for their use!

Not everyone has the *same* gifts, Paul says, but here’s the thing: everyone has **a gift!** **Everyone has something to offer!** It might be a talent or a skill; it might be your experience or your knowledge. You might have energy or interest or passion in something; you might be devoted to prayer, to learning, to listening to God. The point is that each and every one of us is **an asset**; we have something to offer each other in the body of Christ, for the work of ministry, here in this place. So, while we might not have a lot of *some* things, we have *other* things! We have everything we need right here to be faithful to God’s call to us!

So how shall we proceed? We can focus on what’s wrong or what’s right; on our needs or our assets! And yes, we HAVE assets! We may bemoan the age and condition of the building but we HAVE a building, and we can use this building for mission and ministry! We could pick up trash in the parking lot every single day, but we HAVE a parking lot! We can worry because we have too much space and too few people, but we HAVE space and people, with gifts, talents, wisdom, insight, desire, hope and faith. Paul reminds us that what we have has been given to

us by God, not for our own use but for the use of the body. “All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses,” Paul says. “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews and Greek, slaves or free—and we are all made to drink one Spirit.”

So, what if, instead of focusing on what we *need*, we **focused on what we have**? What if we *organized around our assets and not our liabilities*? Yes, we have a building that’s old and needs more resources than we can currently afford but what if, instead of a burden, we viewed it as an *opportunity* to do ministry in partnerships with others? What if, instead of thinking about giving “service to” our community we began to think about “partnering with” other organizations who share our values? What if instead of thinking about the parking lot as a hazardous waste site we thought about it as a place of potential: a great spot for a festival or neighborhood block party, a community garden, an additional building site, a playground or something else entirely?! What could we do with our fenced in courtyard, besides complain that we need to mow the grass?!

Who can partner with us: what churches, businesses, organizations, non-profits, or individuals? How do we offer *solidarity* to our neighbors, rather than charity? What if we got to know our *community* not it’s problems? How different would this body of Christ be if we focused on what we CAN do and not what we can’t?

Jeremiah 29:7 records God saying, “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, **for in its welfare you will find your welfare.**” Listen to that: “in its welfare you will find your own!” Our neighbors have assets too; perhaps *this* body

of Christ needs to see itself as part of the wider community in a new, expansive way. Perhaps our future lies in combining what we all have in order to live into what we all can become.

Perhaps God is already beginning to do that in our midst. Several weeks ago, some of us met with leaders from the YWCA to talk about sharing our education building; we thought we were headed in a particular direction but in a later conversation, we discovered we were no longer on the “same page. At the same time, we also met with leaders from CCLU, to seek their support for the on-going use of our building; again, we thought we were going in the same direction. But in a subsequent meeting it seemed like we were not. In each of these conversations, we were focused not on what we had, what we could offer each other, but instead each group focused on what we needed, on what we lacked.

Then we began a conversation with Steel River Playhouse, who is looking for a place to rehearse. What an incredible opportunity, some of us thought, to bring drama to our space! What might happen if we welcomed them here? And we began a conversation, but a different one this time. Because rather than talking about what we need, we began to talk with another group about what we could *offer* each other, about how we could serve each other and the community of which we are a part. Instead of focusing the conversation on our needs, we focused on our assets! And in doing so we just may have tapped into something more creative and transformative and engaging than paying rent and using space: we might have begun to envision ministry! Together, with Steel River, drama could come to worship, to children, to our community through the use of this space!

We are living into the questions and it is messy! And we don't always even know which questions to ask, but we are discerning that. **Perhaps the question isn't “what do we need and**

how do we get it” but rather “*what do we have and how can we share it?*” What might the answers be then, if we live into God’s desire for us?

In Echo Hall you will find a second kiosk with four new questions waiting for your response! I want to urge you to continue to engage the first questions even as you answer the second set; and if you have not yet participated, please add your responses to our growing discernment. Read what is there, add what your heart tells you to. Do we focus on what we need or what we have?

The table set for us today reminds us of what we have: a call to redemption, to wholeness, to life! Come to the table mindful of what you need but thankful for what you have, the gift of forgiveness and new life in the grace and mercy of God in Jesus Christ.