

Gifts for the Common Good
A Sermon for MLK Weekend 2025
Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
January 19, 2025
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

Scripture Reading - 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Now concerning spiritual gifts, siblings, I do not want you to be uninformed. ²You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. ³Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to 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. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

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At the Lexington Martin Luther King, Jr. Day celebration tomorrow, our Human Rights Committee will feature mini-biographies of women of the Civil Rights Movement. (Yes, this is one more plug from me that we should all participate in that event.) Our Human Rights Committee asked some local leaders if we would write biographies of some of the women who led the movement. I said yes and picked two at random - and because the

Holy Spirit knows what she's doing, one of them was Pauli Murray. Rev. Dr. Murray was a lawyer, poet, professor and priest. I think you will be as surprised as I was to hear how much the Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray contributed to the movement. Dr. Murray was a person of many spiritual gifts - knowledge and wisdom and faith, certainly - but perhaps most profoundly of prophecy - in the modern sense of that word. Dr. Murray was a prophetic witness for justice whose ideas were often years ahead. Dr. Murray's legal prowess laid the foundations for court cases that changed America. Decades before mass marches and protests, Pauli Murray's prophetic voice influenced basically every civil rights leader that followed. Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray's spiritual gifts truly served the common good.

Born in 1915, Pauli Murray was always decades ahead.

In 1940 - 15 years before Rosa Parks - Pauli Murray refused to sit in the back of the bus and was jailed in Virginia.

In 1943 - 17 years before the Greensboro sit-ins - Pauli Murray was a leader in a sit-in that desegregated a DC restaurant.

In 1943 Pauli Murray was the first person identified as a woman* to earn a law degree at Howard University.

In 1954, attorney Thurgood Marshall's arguments in *Brown v. Board of Education* drew upon Pauli Murray's book *States' Laws on Race and Color* that rejected "separate but equal" policies.

After a decades long friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt that originated in correspondence Murray called "confrontation by typewriter," on civil rights matters, Pauli Murray was appointed to the Commission on the Status of Women. In 1966 Murray was among the founders of the National Organization for Women (NOW) but left when issues of poverty and race were not addressed by NOW.

Recognizing the interrelated impacts of race and gender bias, Pauli Murray coined the term Jane Crow in 1965. In a nutshell, this is the concept that prejudice based on gender is compounded by prejudice based on race, which may further be compounded by other factors like age and class. You might know the idea of Jane Crow by a different turn of phrase because 24 years later scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, which has the same meaning.

During the Civil Rights movement, Murray helped found the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

Attorney Ruth Bader Ginsburg, in her arguments on gender equality to the US Supreme Court, cited Pauli Murray's legal arguments of 6 years prior. Indeed, Pauli Murray advocated for the ACLU to hire RBG to work on gender equality. Dr. Murray would go on to say, "I've lived to see my lost causes found." Late in life, Dr. Murray said "I've been a firebrand..." singing the feathers of the establishment.¹

Dr. Murray died in 1985, but in 2020, building on Murray's legal frameworks, the ACLU won a Supreme Court victory against anti-LGBTQIA+ discrimination.

Now, why on a Sunday morning am I preaching about Pauli Murray? All I've told you so far is that Pauli Murray's legal wisdom laid the groundwork for race and gender equality cases. Well, Pauli Murray is also remembered as the first African-American woman* to be ordained an Episcopal Priest, in 1977 - a couple of years after the first women ordained in that tradition. Pauli Murray said, "All of these problems of human rights in which I had been involved were moral and spiritual problems and I saw that the profession to which I had devoted my life could not give us answers. I was being pointed in the direction of the priesthood."

¹ "Gifts of the Holy Spirit to Women I Have Known" A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray

There's another reason I'm lifting up Pauli Murray today, January 19, 2025. Right now, the subject of gender identity is contentious. Trans, non-binary and queer folks are facing new and renewed threats. The rhetoric around gender identity, in religious and secular circles, is scary. Pauli Murray, many scholars now believe, was non-binary, and scholars alternate between she/her and they/them in biographies. There was no language available to them in the middle of the twentieth century - and it was not safe to be gender-nonconforming or queer - during Pauli Murray's lifetime. But they left notes.

Just a couple of examples: In family correspondence, Murray described having a "he/she personality." Their personal records include correspondence with doctors seeking testosterone treatment (that is to say, gender affirming care) and other references to gender identity. There are many other examples in their papers. For this reason and many others, many contemporary scholars consider Rev. Dr. Murray to have been gender non-binary. They were also in a same-sex committed relationship. Irene (Renee) Barlow was Murray's partner and "spiritual mate" of 17 years. Today, Rev. Dr. Murray is revered by many as a queer icon.

Rev. Dr. Murray preached about living in the intersection of many identities, saying:

"It was my destiny to be the descendent of slaveowners as well as slaves, to be of mixed ancestry, to be biologically and psychologically integrated in a world where the separation of the races was upheld by the Supreme Court of the United States as the fundamental law of the Southland. My entire life's quest has led me ultimately to Christ in whom there is not East or West, no North or South, no Black or White, no Red or Yellow, no Jew or Gentile, no Islam or Buddha, no Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, or Roman Catholic, no male or female. There is no Black Christ nor White Christ nor Red Christ—although these images may have transitory cultural value. There is only Christ, the Spirit of love and reconciliation, the Healer of deep psychic wounds, drawing us all closer to that Goal of perfection

which links us to God our creator and to eternity.” - from Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray’s sermon on the occasion of their ordination in 1977.

When times get complicated, we turn to our ancestors who lived through complicated times. We need examples of faithful people, people with the gifts of the Spirit, people who worked with great determination for the common good of all.

As the Rev. Dr. preached, “it would be wrong to think that the Holy Spirit comes to us merely to give us comfort or ease. The work of the Holy Spirit is to transform our lives and to conform us to Christ, to perfect us.”²

Right here lately, in these complicated days, I’ve been thinking of an African-American who pioneered civil rights; a person of many identities who pioneered intersectionality; a legal scholar who paved a way to the Supreme Court; a queer person who asked for what they needed; a trailblazing reverend who was profoundly pastoral *and* prophetic. As we lift up the stories of civil rights leaders like Pauli Murray, and Dr. King, may we build on their foundations and spiritual gifts as we strive, without discouragement, for the common good.

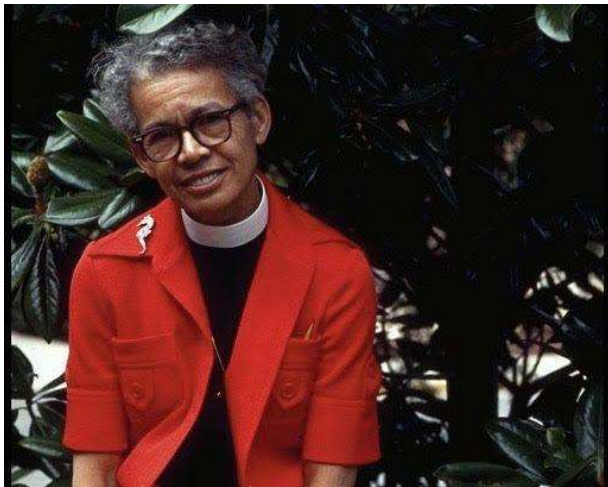
“Surrender to none the fire of your soul.” - Pauli Murray

Amen.

² “The Gift of the Holy Spirit” - A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray



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<https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/schlesinger-library/collections/pauli-murray>

Learn More:

- *Proud Shoes: The Story of An American Family* by Pauli Murray

- *Song in a Weary Throat: Memoir of an American Pilgrimage* by Pauli Murray
- *Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray* by Rosalind Rosenberg
- *The Firebrand and the First Lady: Portrait of a Friendship: Pauli Murray, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Struggle for Social Justice* by Patricia Bell-Scott
- *My Name is Pauli Murray* - 2022 documentary available online
- <https://www.paulimurraycenter.com/>