I love the nation of South Africa. I have had the privilege of visiting there twice and hope to return some day. The first time was when my college choir toured South Africa for two weeks; the second was when I was in seminary and still United Methodist, and helped plan a global event for youth and young adults from around the world that would be hosted there. I was doing a site visit to prepare for an event that I would ironically not be a part of.

But loving another country, just like loving our own, means that you love its people and its history. To love the United States means that you acknowledge the fact that we had (and still have) our struggles with racism, yet we love our nation anyway. And I believe the same can be said for South Africa. Just as a parent loves a child despite his or her faults and failings.

I read a story about a British Airways flight from Johannesburg where a middle-aged and apparently quite wealthy white South African woman found herself sitting next to a black man. As the passengers were filing in and taking their seats, she called a member of the cabin crew to ask about her seating. "What seems to be the matter, madam?" asked the attendant.

"Can't you see?" the woman responded. "You have assigned me a seat next to him" (pointing at the black man). I cannot possibly sit next to this disgusting human being. Please find me another seat as soon as possible!"
The cabin attendant, hearing the words and observing the commotion that was clearly stirring among other passengers, commented, "Please calm down, madam. The flight is very full today but I will do what I can. I will go and check on availability of seats in business or first classes."

Meanwhile the woman, with a scowl on her face, looked at the black man beside her, who was outraged, as were many of the surrounding passengers. A few minutes later the attendant returned with good news that she delivered to the woman, who continued to look at her fellow passengers with a smug and self-satisfied grin. The flight attendant told the woman, "Madame, unfortunately, as I suspected economy is full. I have spoken to the cabin services director and business class is also full. However, we do have one seat in first class."

Before the woman had a chance to answer, the flight attendant continued, "It is most extraordinary to make this kind of upgrade; I needed to receive special permission from the captain. But, given the circumstances, the captain felt that it was outrageous that someone be forced to sit next to such an obnoxious person." With that the flight attendant turned to the black man sitting next to the woman and said, "So if you would like to gather your things, sir, I have your seat ready for you." At that point, the surrounding passengers stood and gave a standing ovation as the black man walked triumphantly into first class.

You see, we are all different; we are all different because God created us that way. Think how boring life and faith and our church would be if we were all the same. However, I believe the challenge for many of us in our modern age today is that we see diversity as a weakness rather than as a strength. It seems to me as I watch news
programs, read the newspaper (not to mention letters to the editor in our local paper) that we seem almost obsessed with who is right and who is wrong. Who is in and who is out. Who does God favor and who does God not?

I worry about the lessons that our culture is sending young people, as if to say that they must be a certain way or they will somehow be viewed as “less than.” And what worries me the most is the fact that no one can live up to the impossible standards that our world sets for us all, and so instead of saying “You know, I’m different and it’s okay” however they define different, they might try to hide who God creatively and genuinely created them to be. They begin to see diversity in themselves and within others as something to be afraid of rather than something to be celebrated.

However, if we listen to the words of the Apostle Paul that were read for us today, he enumerates the many gifts of the Spirit. Each is unique and special; each is given, Paul says, as the Spirit chooses. Each gift is different and must be used in a collective sense, with others, in building the realm of God. It is through this diversity of gifts that we find our source of sustenance. We need all the gifts, but none of us has them all. Thus, we need to appreciate the diversity, the differences, and the strength that we gain through sharing with one another.

Some are given great wisdom; some are given significant knowledge. We know that these two gifts are very different, but both are necessary. We need a certain amount of knowledge—that is, people who are smart—but we definitely also need people who know how to apply that knowledge, those with wisdom to apply facts and information.
Paul continues by describing many gifts, each given by the Spirit, each different and unique. Whether it is faith, healing, being a worker of miracles, prophecy, languages, or one who interprets languages, the gift is part of the breadth of God's goodness. These gifts, together with knowledge and wisdom, show the diversity of our talents. All are important; all are necessary. Through the diversity of the gifts, we are made stronger: stronger people, a stronger community, a stronger church.

I am proud of my hometown of Houston, Texas. This past May, on a Wednesday night, after nearly nine hours of deliberations by over 200 hundred speakers, the Houston City Council passed an ordinance extending equal rights protections to gay and transgender residents.

Despite weeks of discussion and dissent over the measure, the final vote was 11-6. "While much of the debate has centered around the gay and transgender section of the ordinance, it is a comprehensive ordinance," said Mayor Annise Parker after the vote. "It is a good step forward for the city of Houston."

The measure bans discrimination based not just on sexual orientation and gender identity but also, as federal laws do, sex, race, color, ethnicity, national origin, age, religion, disability, pregnancy and genetic information, as well as family, marital or military status.

However, even though Mayor Parker is the first openly gay mayor of a major city, it was not Mayor Parker who gave the most memorable speech that night. Rather, it was a Houston City Council Member, The Honorable Richard Nguyen, who said the following in his remarks:

"I just want to share my thoughts today. On this journey and adventure we call life there are times when we come to a split in the road and we are forced to make a
choice. I came to that split and I struggled with the decision. I prayed and I asked others to pray for me. I searched my soul and I asked God to help me navigate my way. I asked my head for wisdom and my heart for compassion. Surprisingly the answer did not come from my head or my heart. It came from the eyes of a six year-old when my daughter looked into mine and saw my struggle and said 'Daddy, be brave.' My sweet six year-old mentor not only gave me the answer, but also taught me a lesson, and this is what I learned. This world on earth isn't mine to keep. I am merely passing through on my way to God's kingdom. We are all travelers, sharing the road, making the same trek, heading toward the same destination. As fellow travelers we all deserve to go through our journeys with respect, equality, honor, and dignity. I look around this chamber and I see not only colleagues and friends, but brothers and sisters. So brothers and sisters, we are given the honor to serve, but most importantly we are bestowed the responsibility to lead. I want to serve and I want to lead. I listened to a pure innocent heart. I opened mine up and allowed compassion to support this equal rights ordinance. We have nothing to lose and much to gain. Let us continue our journeys with love and peace."

It's not simply what Council Member Nguyen said that is compelling, but also his story. At one point, he was homeless until he was finally able to get a job. And where did he work? For nine years, he faithfully worked for the Houston Solid Waste Department. And now? Now he serves as an influential member of the city council of the fourth largest city in our nation. But more than that, he is a person who sees the strength in our diversity. May we do the same. For I believe the Apostle Paul, Jesus the Christ, and God, desire no less of us. May it be so.