

Sermon: What We Do Today

Year C, Third Sunday after the Epiphany

[Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21](#)

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One of my favorite quotes after the mid-term elections was something like this, “I swear, if you offered them the choice between an ice cream cone and a punch in the face, it would still come out 51-49.” I think the church at Corinth was like that. Reading through 1st and 2nd Corinthians, it seems like there are at least three groups: Team Paul, Team Apollos and Team Cephas¹ (which is Jesus’ nickname for Peter). It’s not really clear what each team stood for, and there could definitely be more divisions. But clearly the church at Corinth was divided. And, like our political landscape right now, they were divided over important things, like sexual morals and managing scarce resources and division of labor.²

When you read the letters to the church in Corinth, and scholars believe that the two letters we have are really a mash up of at least 5 letters, maybe more, you hear Paul’s message loud and clear. Of course, he’s arguing for the beliefs of Team Paul. That makes sense. But what has him angry is the divisions.³ It makes him crazy that the church at Corinth is allowing differences to divide them. Because that makes absolutely no sense to him.

There are plenty of readings from the Bible, where we need to step back and figure out what that story is supposed to teach us. The Good Samaritan answers the question, “who is my neighbor.” We’re not supposed to hear the story of the Good Samaritan and decide that our neighbors are only those people who drag injured people out of ditches and park them in inns and pay for their rooms. We’re supposed to hear the story of the Good Samaritan and realize that the meaning of neighbor is pretty expansive, or it could be, whether you’re the guy in the ditch or the guy with the donkey.

The image in today’s reading, which Dave did beautifully, I was so pleased when I sent Dave the reading because I knew he’d do a good job with it, is not Paul saying “the church is *like* a human body.” No, for Paul, the church *is* the body of Christ. The body of Christ is and needs to be diverse.⁴ It’s a fact. A reality. So the diversity within the body of Christ is not something Paul is arguing *for*, it’s a position he’s arguing *from*.⁵ Given that we are the body of Christ, what do we need to understand because that’s true?

First, we need to understand that all gifts come from God.⁶ Around this time of year we get to hear pieces of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s speeches and sermons. He earned his

¹ Clarence T. Craig, “The First Epistle to the Corinthians: Introduction,” vol. 10 in *The Interpreter’s Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1953), 7.

² Craig, 7-8.

³ Craig, 7.

⁴ Troy Miller, “Third Sunday after Epiphany, Exegetical Perspective, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 281.

⁵ Miller, 281.

⁶ Charles B. Cousar, “Third Sunday after Epiphany: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a” in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year C*, ed. Charles B. Cousar et al. [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994], 117.

Masters of Divinity from Boston University. Most MDiv masters programs require one, maybe two, preaching classes out of 27-30 classes. Rev. King took 5 at Boston University. We know his “I Have A Dream” speech from the March on Washington. What many of us don’t realize is that was far from the first time he had given that speech. He had honed it over many occasions, so that as he stood on the Lincoln Memorial it was ready. God gave him a gift for oratory. And he invested and worked incredibly hard so that his God given gift would shine in God’s service in the fight for justice and equality. But Rev. King’s gift, all our gifts, came from God.

Second, we need each other.⁷ The foot needs the hand needs the eye needs the ear. The body is not just one organ. A church isn’t the preacher or the moderator or the largest donor or the best singer. We need all those and everyone else to be complete in the body. Paul having the various body parts talk and say such patently foolish things underlines what he means.

Third, there is to be no hierarchy of gifts.⁸ No one’s gift is any better than any other. President Reagan was once asked what it was like to be the most powerful man in the world. He answered, “I’m not the most powerful man in the world. The guy who puts my schedule on my desk every morning. He’s the most powerful man in the world.” Pick your gift: preaching, teaching, singing, cooking, cleaning. The church without that gift is less than the church with it. Some of you are happy to get up in front of the congregation and read or sing. Some of you would rather staple your tongue than do that. Different gifts. One isn’t better than another.

Fourth, clearly all that diversity can lead to dissension and strife, so we need to care for one another.⁹ It doesn’t mean that we paper over the diversity. It doesn’t mean that we pretend to agree when we don’t. When we do that, we step out of the real world that God created and into some fantasy land of our own devising. God calls us to live in the real world. And the real world is full of differences. We are called to care for one another *because* of those differences. We are called to care for one another *to nurture* those differences. We may disagree with each other. But we listen to each other and acknowledge each other’s gifts.

Today’s reading from 1 Corinthians is from chapter 12. It ends with *But strive for the greater gifts.* (1 Corinthians 12:31) Which seems like Paul has just *completely* walked away from the argument he’s been making so convincingly. If we read a bit further, you’d see where Paul is going. *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* (1 Corinthians 13:1-7) Love is the greater gift. And it too is a gift from God. That’s the gift we should use to reconcile the diversity of all the other gifts.

But before we step away from Paul’s argument about the church being the body of Christ, I want to hold up something that I learned in preparing for today’s service. The body parts that Paul lifts up, the foot, the hand, the ear, the eye, the nose, all those are the parts which are most likely

⁷ Cousar, 118.

⁸ Cousar, 118.

⁹ Cousar, 118.

to be lost in the wars of his time.¹⁰ More damaging wounds would probably lead to death. But some people in the first century would survive those losses. And come home damaged. And come home less than they had been. Even when we gather all the gifts we have, we may still be damaged, we may still be broken in ways we would rather not have happened.

If we are the body of Christ, then we are a body that was beaten and humiliated, spiked and sliced open. We are an innocent body, damaged and broken so that the innocent and the powerless would no longer be trampled by the rich and the powerful. We are body that insists that power and wealth can not be used to build empire through acts of violence, but to bring forth the kingdom of God through the gathering of God's given gifts.

In the other reading today, from the book of Luke, Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" (Luke 4:18-19). After he sits down, the synagogue is in an uproar. They gang up to chase Jesus out of town, trying to throw him off a cliff. What is so outrageous about what Jesus said? That God cares for the poor? That God cares for the captives and the blind and the oppressed? That God has proclaimed a year of Jubilee? No. They're heard that all before. It's in the book of Isaiah that they've been hearing for hundreds of years. What is outrageous is that Jesus said *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.* (Luke 4:21)¹¹

That message is still outrageous. And it is still true. We take our diverse God given gifts, we rely on each other, we accept that no gift is better than another, we come together in love. We take this body of Christ, this damaged and broken, beaten and humiliated body, with all its limitations, and, in the face of the rich and powerful, we join with God to bring forth the kingdom of God through the gathering of God's given gifts. We do that today. And every day.

¹⁰ Clarence T. Craig, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians: Exegesis," vol. 10 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1953), 161.

¹¹ Verity A. Jones, "Living by the Word: Reflections on the Lectionary [Jan 24, 2016]." *The Christian Century* 133 (2) [2016]: 18.