

Sermon for Epiphany 3C
Sunday, January 23, 2022
“Holy Gifts”

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

I love this passage from today’s epistle lesson because it is so easy to understand. It is direct and to the point. The imagery goes right to the heart of the matter—to use yet another body part. The body has many parts. Individually, the parts are useless, but each member has its own unique function and together the body can do things. The head directs the parts, but the head without the body parts is useless and ineffective. This is indeed the perfect model for the church.

Each and every person who is part of the Body of Christ—the Church—is important to the church’s function. Each and every one of you is important to the ability of All Saints to do its work and fulfill its mission. You may think you don’t have any gifts that would be useful to the work of the church. You may think that you don’t have anything to contribute because you’re not on the vestry or the altar guild, or you don’t have time to participate in one of our many ministries. You may think that when God was passing out talent, he ran out when he came to you. None of that is true. Everyone has useful gifts. You have useful gifts. Each and every person here has a gift to share. If you’re not sure what your gift is, look inside yourself. What do you enjoy doing? What are you passionate about? What do you do for a living? What do you know that you could teach to someone else? The answer to any of those questions can help reveal your gifts. The answer will identify what part of the body you are and what you can contribute to the work of the church. Maybe God has blessed you with financial security, so that you can share some of your abundance for the many needs of the parish; we want to restore our bells and we desperately need new vestments and chancel sets. And please, remember us in your will; bequeath us with some of your assets.

The Mission Statement of All Saints Church echoes the words of St. Paul from the epistle lesson. “The mission of All Saints Church is to proclaim Jesus as Lord by our participation in the Eucharist, our fellowship in oneness and diversity, by respect for each other, and through outreach into the community.” We proclaim Jesus Christ through our worship. We celebrate our oneness as the body of Christ in our diversity. We are blessed in this place with incredible diversity: people from different parts of the world, people who speak different languages, people who do a variety of things in their lives, people who have gifts and talents that can help us live out our mission in worship, caring for each other, and making our community in here and out there a better place to be.

Unity in the midst of diversity is at the heart of what Paul was trying to tell the Corinthian church. His use of body imagery is not unique for ancient writers, although Paul is the only New Testament writer to make use of it. In the ancient world the body was often used to support the social hierarchy, be it the family, the city, the empire, whatever. The head represented the wealthy and elite and everybody else formed the hands and feet to do the dirty work. But, for Paul, everybody was equally as important; he turned the norms of social structure on its head by preaching that everyone matters, everyone is important, regardless of who they were or where they came from. Those who were perceived to be without status were just as important as those perceived to be elite and powerful. In the Corinthian church the “weak” were despised and shamed by others. Anyone or anything that was “different” was shamed by others. Paul emphasized strength *because of* diversity, and that diversity was not simply to be tolerated, but rather something that was to be received as the gift that it is. Not only is diversity a gift from God, but diversity is necessary for the church to survive. I wish our nation and the world would understand the beauty of diversity and the strength that unity in diversity brings. Unity in the midst of diversity is really the foundation of our great nation, in the words its motto: *E pluribus unum*—out of many, one.

Our diversity here at All Saints is our greatest strength—diversity of people, diversity of ideas, diversity of opinions, diversity of spiritual practice, diversity of language, diversity of Christian expression. Our call by God is not to try to create uniformity, but unity. We don’t all have to proclaim the message in exactly the same way, but we are proclaiming the same message: that God is love, that Jesus Christ is Lord, and that everyone deserves respect for who they are and how they live out their purpose. The core message of love, respect, dignity should be what we convey from the moment one walks in the door to the moment one leaves, and everyone should be able to carry that message with them into the world. And we will proclaim that message in a way that anyone who walks into this space will feel the spirit and love of God should know that this is a sacred place where anyone seeking rest, refreshment, and renewal will find it.

St. Paul’s words of wisdom to the Corinthian Church also reminds us that we are all created by for a purpose. We are all given a gift or variety of gifts that not only benefits the church, but allows each of us to make an impact in the world, be it in our families, in our communities, or beyond. If you’re unsure of what that purpose is or if you’re longing to make a change in your life, go to God in prayer and ask for your purpose to be revealed to you. You’re not too young, too old, too broke, too busy, too sick, or too tired to do God’s work. Whatever barriers you might want to put up as an excuse, God can help you see your purpose and bring it to fruition. Jesus Christ understood his purpose when he read the scriptures in the synagogue, and he declared it to all who were present.

As Christ’s Body, the Church, we continue his mission and carry out God’s work in the present age. Through the strength of our random collection of body parts, we will be the church that God wants us to be and reflect the church that Paul imagined it

to be—each using our unique gifts to use together to be the one Body of Christ. We have a unique brand of church here. We do things like nobody else, because we are All Saints, Woodhaven, and we are going to be united in how we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to each other and to the world. Amen.

Resource

Brian Peterson, “Commentary on Corinthians 12:12-31a,”
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2733