

## “Abundant Gifts”

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Luke 4:14-21

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*As parts of the body of Christ, we are gifted with abundant gifts as interdependent and indispensable parts of the witness of Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom.*

Not to draw any comparisons, but the story of Jesus’ first sermon got me thinking about the first time I stood in a pulpit and dared to proclaim the word of the Lord.

It was a sunny summer morning in the apple growing region of central Washington State. I’d been sent to these two little congregations as a student minister from my college in Southern California, and I have always believed the college minister who assigned me these tiny churches must have had a good laugh afterwards. I was a suburban college student raised in the valleys outside of Los Angeles – nothing about me said “apple orchards.” For 10 weeks, I left behind the smog and the traffic for communities with more apples than people. There was one traffic light in the county, and that was 45 minutes away from the “larger” of the two towns where I was assigned.

On my assigned Sunday, I stood in the pulpit grateful that it concealed my nervous legs. I had spent the entire week writing my sermon, which I believed was a highly polished homiletical gem. In truth, it was more like a rough-edged rock, lacking any focus or any sort of polish and lasting about three minutes long. In fact, it was so short that when I was finished, I looked at the congregation and decided that since we had a few minutes left I’d deliver the entire sermon a second time.

According to Luke, when Jesus finished his first sermon the crowd was so agitated and shaken that they arose and tried to chase Jesus off a cliff. When I finished my first sermon, the congregation looked at their watches as if to say, “Looks like we’ll beat the Methodists to brunch today.”

Two things have stayed with me since then. One is that unfailing kindness and rich faith that congregation shared with me, their pitifully young and inexperienced substitute preacher. They lived into the fullness of their role as part of the body of Christ. No matter how awkward my first time in the pulpit might have been, they were encouraging and supportive. That might be called polite, but it was an extension of their role as indispensable members of the larger body of Christ.

Not that they saw themselves that way. Likely, they didn’t. And maybe we don’t, either, which is the second lesson that has stayed with me: being part of the Body of Christ matters. It

matters no matter the size of a church, its relative wealth, or even its health. It matters because their witness and worship, no matter how small, is a witness to the power of the Holy Spirit and testimony to the powerful vision expressed by Jesus at the beginning of his ministry.

Jesus' powerful words announce the power of God at work in the world. It is a power that turns the world upside down: the good news brings relief to the poor, release to the prisoners, and recovery of sight to the blind. The words of the prophet announce the beginning of Jesus' ministry to disrupt the world so that it might experience the healing grace of God.

The words of Jesus enlist us into this ministry, calling us to fulfill our roles – whatever they might be – as part of the body which Paul calls the church.

Jesus concludes his sermon with the ultimate mic drop: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.” (Luke 4:21, Common English Bible). Astonishing! A young man, unschooled and untrained, the son not a religious priest or scribe but of a carpenter. Who is he to deliver this sort of pronouncement?

Who does things like this?

The answer, of course, is declared by Paul: Jesus Christ the Messiah. The one born of Mary. The one whose lips will announce words of forgiveness and healing, whose hands will release those bound by evil, and whose body will be broken to pay for sin. The one who turned Saul the persecutor into Paul the preacher.

Who does things like this?

Jesus, the one who brought grace upon grace to the Corinthians—an affluent, sophisticated, intelligent, diverse yet somewhat cantankerous, deeply culturally divided group of Christians who are so divided they can't even seem to agree on what time church should start.

Their fractious nature has caused them to forget the basics of their identity. They have been gifted with extraordinary rich and diverse gifts, but have allowed a focus on their individual desires and wants and to shift their understanding of what it means to be a church. It is a searing indictment: they have become so focused on their individual abilities; they've overlooked the needs of others. As Paul says it, they have become the eyes that look at the hands of body, saying, “I have no need of you.”

These Corinthians are divided by politics, religion, education, socio-economic backgrounds and so much more, they have allowed their individualism to tear apart the body of Christ, disfiguring it beyond all recognition. And in so doing they have set aside that marvelous vision of the kingdom Jesus proclaims in Luke: preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the prisoners, recovering sight to the blind and liberating the oppressed.

They forget that when one member suffers, all members suffer. Or that the “inferior” parts of the body are of no less significance than the greater—and, frankly, are often more important.

This metaphor of the Body was not original to Paul and was, in fact, common to Greco-Roman thought. But Paul pushes it further. The body is not just a civic community, it is the body of *Christ*. It is a body connected by baptism, a body of shared joys and struggles, a body that makes manifest the ways of Christ in the world.

But by allowing divisions to break them apart, the Corinthians have abandoned that witness. They've allowed the cultural patterns of status and privilege to gain a footing, ignoring the abundance of the gifts of the whole by over valuing the gifts of a few.

In their divisions, they have neglected to see that God's gift of unity is not the same as uniformity. It's a problem, not only centuries ago, but today and frankly in every age. Whenever individualism is prized so highly that it ignores the needs of whole, the body's muscle tone becomes weak. It loses coordination, becomes weak, and infected.

Individualism cuts apart community, elevating status and privileging rank. Individual of great gifts are seen as most valuable, while those who are less capable, not quite as strong, or not nearly as articulate are seen as having less value. Paul stands up, and like a seasoned football coach, looks them directly in the eyes to say, "Cut it out!"

As it is, he says, we who are many are one. Each member, from the very youngest to the oldest is valued. Each congregation, from the smallest gathering in isolated communities to the largest cathedrals, has a role to play.

There are varieties of gifts, he tells them, all given by the same Spirit. They are not a team of competitors and rivals, not a team of stars and standouts, but an interdependent body claimed by Christ. Jesus or Greeks, slaves or free, all made to drink of the one Spirit.

Here's a confession: during Covid, I've been drawn into the world of streaming television movies and binge-watching television shows. Much as I try to tell myself this is done in the name of sermon preparation the reality is I have to admit not all of the shows are all that edifying.

One show that caught my attention is Netflix's "Cheer," which follows the world of competitive collegiate cheerleading. Do not go there looking for theological metaphors. But the show offers an honest view of the complex athleticism and hard driven determination of a junior college in Texas with all of the drama that goes with it. And, believe me, there is plenty of drama.

One reviewer says, look past the petty drama of the individuals and you'll find yourself astonished by what the human body can do in terms of gymnastic leaps, twists, tumbles and turns. Forty individuals lifting and flying: building pyramids, tossing young women into the air. And what you see is that each person, from the strongest and most experienced to the weakest rookie, is absolutely indispensable.

They matter.

That is the message for the church of Jesus Christ today. We might be scattered and not in one place, but each of us matters. Each of us is indispensable.

Among the saddest conversations I have are the ones that begin, “Pastor, I’d like to come to church, but I don’t think you’d want me,” or “I don’t know if I’d fit in,” or “I’m not sure what I could bring.”

The tension of church is always finding ways of blending individuality and uniqueness with the larger interconnected, interdependent Body of Christ. This body with all of its abundant gifts is a place where, in the words of Edwin Friedman, we can have the capacity to be an “I” while remaining infinitely connected to each other.

And that remains a real struggle for God’s people today.

Sometimes folks have been told outright that they are not wanted – like an African American friend of mine who was met at a church door not with a welcome but with the question “Can we help you?” Sometimes messages are communicated without words. Other times, we feel ourselves pushed away, our gifts and talents gone unnoticed.

We are called to proclaim the kingdom that Jesus announced: one that rejects the levels of social stratification so valued by the world in favor of the community of love and welcome initiated by Christ. Karen Stokes has said, The inviting church is a tangible expression of the hospitality of God; people come in search of meaning in their lives, spiritual growth, deeper relationship with Christ, opportunities to be of service in the world. They also come in search of authentic community, a place where they are known and accepted and where they can experience a sense of belonging.”

In my awkward teenage years when my body grew faster than my coordination, the basketball coaches at school would try to corner me into trying out for the team. That is, until they saw me bump into things and trip over my own size 13 feet. Balance and Coordination have never come easy. Individualism fights against a coordinated effort where every gift is valued, and every person needed.

Every gift is needed and valued. Every gift matters. Thanks be to God! Amen.