

“We Suffer and Rejoice Together”

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1 Corinthians 12:12-31

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. 13 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.

14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” 22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; 24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this.

But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.

29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

SUCCESS IS HARD TO DEFINE

How do you determine the success of a church?

Is the successful church the church with the most members?

Is the successful church the church with the most money or the fanciest building?

Perhaps a successful church is the one with the best educational program or the best preacher?

Maybe the successful church is filled with people who have the most intellectual and spiritual gifts? It's not quantity but quality that matters.

How do we decide if a church is successful?

This is an important question because our view of success will determine our priorities and how we do mission.

This question of success is a question of identity.

Who are we? What is our job as disciples of Jesus Christ?

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was written to a church that was having a hard time answering these questions.

Some people thought that they were a good church because they had a fancy preacher, a guy named Apollos.

Some people thought that they were a good church because they had people that were spiritually gifted.

Some people thought that they were a good church because they had studied the faith under such stellar theologians as Paul and Peter.

But, unfortunately the good preaching, the good theology, and the gifts of the Spirit had not made the congregation at Corinth a good church.

On the contrary this was a church filled with dissension and immoral behavior that even the pagans found reprehensible.

Paul addressed his letter to the “saints” at Corinth, but the Corinthians were anything but saintly.

What was wrong?

They really did have the best preachers, the best teachers and the most gifted people in town.

Why was their church such a mess?

They had spiritual amnesia.
They had forgotten who they were and whose they were.

In our lesson for today Paul reminds them.
He wrote,

“You are the Body of Christ
and individually members of it.”
(1 Corinthians 12:27)

WE HAVE GIFTS

And that’s who we are as well.
We are the Body of Christ.
All of us are members of that Body.

What does this mean? And how does this affect the message and ministry of the church?

First, this message is a challenge to all of us.
All of us are called to do something.
All of us are a part, a vital part of the Body of Christ.

God in Christ has chosen us to be

His flesh and blood ambassadors to the world.
We have been given gifts for ministry,

Now this is a hard sell for some people.

Some people honestly think that they have nothing to offer, that they have no gifts.

But, this passage tells us that this is not true.
All of us have a gift to share.

Paul lists some of those gifts.

Some of the gifts are obviously important.

Paul even says that we should strive for the “greater gifts,” gifts like teaching or healing for instance.

But, some of the gifts seem more mundane,
gifts like “forms of assistance.”

No matter how meager our talents surely we all could do this one. We all have the capacity to be of assistance to someone in some form.

And according to Paul, assisting someone in the name of Christ is an important spiritual gift.

So, I wonder, “What is your spiritual gift?
What has God called you to do in the name of Christ?”

THE IMPORTANCE OF AFFIRMATION

Some of us really don't know the answer to that question. Indeed many of us have very little insight when it comes to our spiritual gifts.

This is why it is so important to encourage brothers and sisters in the church.

Have you ever told someone,
“You know, I think you are good at this.
I think God may be calling you to do this.”?

Ministry often begins this way.

Many of us do the work you do in the church because someone encouraged us in this way.

In the church we believe that everyone has a gift.

So, the first thing I want to do this morning is encourage you. You are important in God's kingdom.

You are a gift to the church, and we need you.

You are vital to us.

You are the Body of Christ.

ALL PARTS ARE IMPORTANT

Paul tells us in our lesson for today that we are all like individual body parts.

We have different functions, and some of those functions might not be so glamorous.

But all of the functions are important.

Have you ever stubbed your toe?

Growing up I often ran around without shoes.
And sometimes I would stub my big toe.

It wasn't anything serious, but my goodness did it hurt. And I payed attention to that toe.

I covered it up. I wore shoes more often. I was more careful how I walked!

My big toe might have been ugly, but I soon learned how important it was to me.

If you were told that you would have to lose one body part, which one would you choose?

I would choose "none of the above."

All our parts are necessary.

We don't want to lose even one part.

And in the same way, each member of the church, the body of Christ is precious and important. You are somebody. You are a child of God. You are the Body of Christ.

CHERISH THE GIFT OF UNITY

Now some people believe that they have gifts. But, they do not understand that in the church all gifts are important and that ministry is shared.

They still operate on the worldly principle that gifts are a matter of personal pride.

This was true in the church at Corinth.

Instead of seeking their true identity in the grace and salvation of our Lord, Jesus Christ, they sought hope in what they could do and achieve for themselves.

The church became another stage on which these people tried to build themselves up and enhance their self-worth.

The Christians at Corinth bragged about the fact that they had so many gifted people.

They bragged about the fact that they were theologically sophisticated. They saw themselves as the premier church in Christendom.

But, unfortunately in their desire to bolster their own self-image they were destroying the greatest gift of all, the gift of unity.

They were not who they were called to be, the Body of Christ functioning in harmony.

Instead, they were a collection of individuals doing their own thing. They were divided over leadership. They were divided over theology.

They were divided over their views on morality.
They were divided by class and social standing.

In short, this congregation was,
as we say in the South,
“a hot mess”.

Unfortunately sometimes the most talented church can also become the most divided church.

This happens when we forget that we are the Body of Christ and each one of us is an important part of that Body. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

The Greek in verse 27 makes it very clear.

We are only a part of the whole.

We are incomplete;
we are imperfect
without the gifts of others.

We all have a part to play in God’s kingdom.
But, we’re not indispensable.

STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

In fact throughout the Bible we learn a paradoxical lesson. There is strength in weakness.

Only in our weakness are we able to truly appreciate the salvation that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Paul told the Corinthians that instead of bragging about their strengths they should be bragging about their weaknesses.

Paul said that God didn’t choose them because they were so talented. In fact if they would think back to the time of their conversion they would remember that not many of them had power, money or prestige.

God chose them because they were weak.
Paul said that God’s power is “made perfect”

...not in the one who is strong,
but in the one who is weak.
(cf. 1 Corinthians 1:26-39; 12:9)

The Church, the Body of Christ is not made up of people who are perfect.
The Body of Christ is made up of sinners
like you and me.

But, by the grace of God,
we have been forgiven.

And because we have been forgiven,
we are free to live in a new way.

We no longer have to live our life trying to justify ourselves.

God in Christ has already done that for us.

In a world that glorifies competition and being better than somebody else,
we are a community that proclaims equality and cooperation.

It is an equality based upon the fact
that we are all sinners saved by grace.

As the hymn puts it, “grace, grace marvelous grace,
grace that is greater than all our sins.”

The amazing grace of God, is revealed in the life death and resurrection of
Jesus. And that grace is revealed in the life of the community created by
his Spirit. We call this community the church.

THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

The early Christian community was a radical departure from ancient soci-
ety. The old divisions no longer mattered.

Paul said in verse 13 that Jews, Greeks, slaves and free were all “baptized
by the Spirit into one body.” They were all given “the one Spirit to drink.”

In the ancient world divisions ran deep.

A Jew did not even enter the home of a Gentile for fear of ritual contamination.

Most masters did not care about their slaves.
They didn't consider them to be human beings.
They were simply property.

But, in the church all that changed.

Sometimes a slave might be in charge of a house church where a former master, a new convert to the faith came to worship.
Jews and Greeks ate together and worshipped together because they had a common salvation in Jesus.

They were united by the Spirit of God's grace and forgiveness.

It was nothing short of revolutionary.
Some said that those early disciples had turned the world upside down.
(Acts 17:6)

And indeed they had done just that.

But, somehow the church at Corinth had forgotten all that. The church at Corinth had reverted to the old ways of self-promotion and pride.

What could they do to recover their true identity in Christ Jesus? Paul had a suggestion.

AN IMAGE REDEFINED

In the ancient world, the image of the body was used to describe the way a city should function.

Everyone had their job to do, and no one should aspire to any higher job. It was a way to "keep people in their place".

But, Paul uses this image in a much different way.

Paul uses the image of the body to stress the diversity and the interdependence of the members.

In a striking departure from ancient political theory Paul states that in the church the “less honorable members” should be treated with “greater respect”.

Instead of honoring the strong and the powerful, they should give the greater honor to the weak.

Now isn't that a radical suggestion?

In our world famous athletes, entertainers, and powerful politicians get all the glory.

But, the Apostle Paul suggests that in God's world the weak should be honored.
(1 Corinthians 12: 22-24)

HONOR THE WEAK

Let me return to my original question.
How do we determine a successful church?

Paul seems to suggest that the success of a church is measured by how that church treats the weakest member?

Do we seek to protect and support the weakest among us? Or do we act like the weak are not so important?

How we treat the weak ones of our community says more about us than anything else.

Several years ago there was a special event at the Outback Steakhouse in St. Cloud.

It was called the “tip a cop night.”

The law enforcement community was out in force at that restaurant helping serve the tables, and there was a special envelope on each table.

To show your appreciation for the work of the law enforcement officers you were to leave a tip.

All the money would go to Special Olympics.

The Outback in Saint Cloud is usually crowded on Friday nights, but as you might imagine this night it was especially crowded. Many people had come to support this cause.

And since my wife was a special education teacher, and we both have been personally involved in Special Olympics, it was natural that we would be there.

Besides, how often do you get to eat steak and support a good cause?

My hungry stomach growled as I clutched that little buzzer. I was desperately hoping that it would soon light up and do that little dance in my hand.

But, as I waited, I began to notice the people who had come to eat that night.

It looked like the whole sheriff's department and their families had come. Outback was definitely the safest place in town that night.

But, I also began to notice that many families had come with their Special Olympic t-shirts and their children who had obviously participated in Special Olympics.

I thought I could see by the look on their faces that they were grateful for the support. It was a very festive occasion for many people.

And you know it made me feel really good about our community. In honoring and caring for the weakest among us I thought that we had somehow become a stronger and better community.

This is how it works in the church.

Hans S. Reinders in an article on how the church should respond to disabilities wrote,

“...the brokenness and limitations of people with disabilities...is too evident to be overlooked.

Much less clear, however, is that, in looking at them in this way, we may fail to see our own brokenness and limitations.

To look at other people’s brokenness and limitations without seeing our own is a gesture of power;
to acknowledge our own brokenness and limitations in the face of theirs is a gesture of community.”

This thought was expressed in another way by today’s prayer of confession. We prayed,

“If we do not see ourselves as the blind,
the broken and the lost,
then neither can we see ourselves as those
whom Jesus found, healed, and claimed as disciples.”

Those that rejected Jesus were “strong” people who were blind to their need for the Great Physician.

Verse 26 of our lesson holds the key to really understanding the unique nature of the church.

It talks about the unity of the church.

In that verse we read,
“If one member suffers,
all suffer together with it;
if one member is honored,
all rejoice together with it.”

All of us will have times in our life when we are honored and rejoice.
And we also will have times in our life when we suffer.

But, in the church we believe that these times of joy and grief need to be shared.

We rejoice together,
and we suffer together.

The key word is “together”.

We do not exist to and for ourselves.
We are a part of something greater,
the Body of Christ.

This is who we are.
This is our identity.

We embrace and celebrate the gifts that God has given us, but at the same time we are honest about our limitations and our weakness. We are together.

In good times and bad, in weakness and in strength, this always holds true,

“We are the Body of Christ and each one of us is a part of it.”

Amen.