

“One Body”

1 Corinthians 12:1-13

June 3, 2007

So, last week on Pentecost, we heard how the disciples were all together, waiting, praying for the promised baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit came, filled them, and they were off proclaiming God’s deeds of power to a bewildered crowd. Three thousand, Scripture tells us, three thousand came to faith that day. They devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers. In other words, the Christian church was born.

As a believer, I rejoice in hearing God moving like this on Pentecost. As the pastor of a congregation, I cringe. As soon as you get three people in a room, there is going to be a majority and a minority view on everything – if not three minority views! Imagine the problems posed by trying to get three thousand people incorporated into the mission and program. Three thousand people and how many different languages? Yipes!

Problems, yes. Solutions? In human terms, no. Yet, by the power of the Holy Spirit, all things are possible.

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians has the longest section dedicated to the work of the Holy Spirit in the Bible. In our Scripture lesson today, Paul talks about how the Holy Spirit draws all believers – diverse and differently gifted – into one body.

Through Paul’s missionary efforts, God planted the church in Corinth. Corinth was a powerful city in the Roman empire. It was strategically located. There was a heavy concentration of “freed men”; former slaves from Rome who had grown wealthy enough to buy their freedom. The Roman authorities did not want a large number of these people lingering in Rome, so they subsidized and encouraged the building of Corinth as a way to get them to move away for better economic opportunities.

Thus, Corinth was a mix of newly-freed and newly-moneyed people. The several house churches which Paul founded began to reflect some of the cultural trends of this diverse population. Some of those who supported these house churches with money resented the fact that Paul had not accepted their patronage and had not developed a dependence upon their money. Rival factions had developed. The house churches developed into a kind of stratified congregations. (This is fairly typical in churches – where the wealthy can hold a power of the purse advantage which results in pressure on the preacher. It also is why this pastor specifically does NOT know what any of you give.) Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is an extended rebuke of this trend and a call to repentance and one-ness in Christ.

The work of the Holy Spirit within the life of the congregation is a topic that comes towards the latter part of letter. Immediately preceding it is Paul’s rebuke for how the Corinthians celebrated the Lord’s Supper. The words he writes are the words we will hear

in a few minutes as we gather around the communion table, “That which I received, I also delivered unto you, that on the night in which he was betrayed...” He urges the Corinthians to abandon the practice of eating separately, getting drunk, and leaving some out because of their poverty. He urges them to eat and drink in a manner worthy of the LORD; and that is, to eat and drink this meal in remembrance of him together.

This brings Paul to the next topic: spiritual gifts. Open your Bibles and follow along as I read 1 Corinthians 12:1-13.

The point is all gifts are given by the same Holy Spirit for the work established by God to bring about the proclamation that, “Jesus is Lord!”

On paper, I think we all would agree with what Paul has written to the Corinthians here. “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities; but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” So, why does Paul have to write this obvious truth and why is it so difficult to live it out?

Paul has to write this obvious truth because it is something that we quickly forget. Each one of us is unique and individual. Each one of us has strengths and weaknesses. Each one of us has likes and dislikes. Each one of us has successes and failures. God has created each one individually and unlike any other. The important thing to remember is: God is the one who has made us this way. The problem is we think that:

- our strengths, likes, and successes are universally important; that our weaknesses, dislikes and failures are excusable; and,
- other’s strengths, likes and successes are not important; and, other’s weaknesses, dislikes, and failures are inexcusable.

Paul has to remind the Corinthians and we have to be reminded that you and I are not the center of the story. Jesus Christ is the center of the story. The Corinthians had begun to separate themselves based upon wealth, gifts, knowledge, and just about everything else. In short, they had begun to think of themselves as favored in God’s eyes – as opposed to everyone else – because they had been given whatever it was they thought was most important.

We had the opposite problem a few years ago. The theme in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was “Unity in Diversity.” If we had meant what Paul meant, it would have been something to celebrate. A variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; a variety of services, but the same Lord; a variety of activities but the same God – yes, what a wonderful gift God has given us: unity in diversity. Unfortunately, the phrase was a euphemism for theological pluralism. In other words, we were called to celebrate our unity in tolerating the praise of many different spirits, many different lords, many different gods.

For example, when Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me,” it seemed too exclusive for people who do not believe. So, in order

to have unity, we need to understand that Jesus' statement was only intended for the people in the room at the time – for them, he was the only way.

So can't you see Paul slapping his forehead and saying to both the Corinthian and Presbyterian churches, "No! No! No! Unity is found in one Spirit, we serve one Lord, one God sets our activity." Our unity is found in Christ, our diversity is found in language, in culture, in gifts, in activities, in services. The work of the Holy Spirit is wide and varied, but the point is singular: to glorify God.

I have told this story before, so I apologize if it sounds familiar. When I was a student at Fuller, I took an intensive class from Chuck Van Engen on God's Missionary People. It was a two week class in the Christmas season. He had us sing Christmas carols at the beginning and end of each session. On the last day, as we concluded our last class time together, Professor Van Engen had us sing "Silent Night." He invited people from the class to come forward and sing a verse in their first tongue. In a class of roughly fifty people, there were more than fifteen first languages. It was a profoundly moving experience to hear God praised in so many tongues in one choir. That's unity in diversity.

Which leads us to the second question: why is it so difficult to live it out?

Living for the common good sounds good, but it difficult to do. Why is it so hard? There are two reasons: first, we mistake the gift for preference and status within God's kingdom; and second, we want to benefit from our own giving.

Mistaking the gift for preference was what happened in Corinth. Those who could speak in tongues thought less of those who could not. Those who were rich were not thrilled with being together with those who were not. Distinctions based upon gifts were drawing rifts between believers.

This continues to be a problem in the church. Wealth, background, language, gifts – music preference – all of these things continue to be used by believers to judge others (and to become self-righteous as if they were somehow different and better).

Paul says, no. "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." We are called to use our gift for the common good AND to encourage others to use their gifts for the common good (which benefits all of us).

The second reason we have difficulty living out this "one body" reality is difficult because we think we should benefit from our giving. We are afraid of investing in a losing cause; of being taken advantage of.

We are taught to expect to receive a return on our investment. We are taught to use our time wisely. We are taught to put our energy into things that will benefit us and our families. "The common good" is a little too nebulous and a little too risky to take on. So,

we wait and we watch and we hold back. We try to provide for our own needs first, and if there is some left over, we will chip in for the common good – at least to an extent.

Holding back means that we are not using the manifestation of the Spirit to the common good. We will go into the specific gifts next week. For now, it is important to know that everyone – yes, everyone – who receives Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior is given gifts by the Holy Spirit to be manifest for the common good. In other words, all of us suffer when any one does not participate. All of us gain when we each bring the best we have and offer it to the church.

Each of us has something different to give. My job is to be the pastor: to equip all of you with the Word of God, to encourage and engage you to go forward into the ministries into which God has called you. I am not the church. I cannot do your ministry for you. Your job is to worship, to pray, to intercede on behalf of one another, to grow in your love for God, and to be a blessing wherever and however God has called you. If you do not come to worship, all of our worship suffers. If you do not pray, all of our ministry suffers. If you do not share your testimony and witness, all of our evangelism suffers. If you do not give financially, all of our mission suffers.

We are to work together to share the good news with those who are lost, who are searching, who have not experienced God's salvation and grace. But we need every one. We need each and every one of you AND we need those whom God is calling us to reach who are not yet here.

But, we say, how do we know that we are not being taken advantage of?

If you wonder about whether you are giving in response to God's call, do not simply listen to me: instead, look at the fruit of the ministry you see. God does not call us to follow blindly, only faithfully. Do you hear the gospel proclaimed? Are the sacraments administered? Are lives being transformed? Are new believers being baptized? Are we reaching out in compassion to those in need and are we being a blessing in our community?

If you can say yes to those things (and I think you can), then you are seeing the fruit of the ministry of the Spirit. If you are a member of this congregation – if God has called you to join this family of faith – or if God is now calling you to participate, then recognize that you are called to give your gifts for the common good.

Then, recognize that your giving is not necessarily for your benefit. We give because we have already received; we love because God first loved us.

I will confess, I would be delighted for this congregation to not have financial concerns – we do. Along with all of you, I look forward to the day in the not-so-distant future that the mortgage payment on the Family Life Center will be retired.

But let me use the Family Life Center as an example. This congregation responded to God's call and, in faith, constructed a building. Many of you gave generously – time, talent, and treasure – to make sure that it was built. The payments continue to be about 25% of our budget.

Yet consider how God is using that faithfulness. The FLC is being used almost every day of the week. Two worship services, several classes, WOW, Presbyterian Women, and other special events all take place in the FLC. Lives are being transformed; lives of people who may never know your names. They may never think of your sacrifice and your giving, but they have been blessed by your faithfulness.

Here's the great irony: even though our giving is not necessarily for our benefit, we are blessed by our giving. There is great joy in participating in the work of the kingdom.

Conclusion:

The work of the Holy Spirit is to build up the body of Christ. Each one of us has received blessings – many blessings – that we are to share.

There are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are a variety of services, but the same Lord; and there are a variety of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

As we come to this table, as we obey Jesus' command to "do this in remembrance of me," we are joined together in one body through the power of the Holy Spirit. We share this meal together, brothers and sisters in Christ, to the glory of God the Father.

Friends, look around. You are the body of Christ in this place. We belong to each other. We are accountable to one another. We all come to this table because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, we have not earned it. If there is anything you are holding back that God is calling you to give, pledge today to begin giving it for the glory of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.