

"For the Common Good"

I Corinthians 12:4-11; I Corinthians 12:27-31
Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus
May 22, 2016 – Trinity Sunday – Rev. Ronald Botts

The apostle Paul left a legacy of ministry in the letters to his churches scattered throughout the Mediterranean. He addressed them on both theological and practical issues, sometimes instructing them, sometimes encouraging them, and sometimes chiding them. Throughout, he shows his concern on their behalf.

In our text for today, Paul shares thoughts about how the Christian community should live together in harmony. Even though he was writing to the fellowship at Corinth, one of the most important cities in ancient Greece, it's surprising how much of what he says applies to all churches, then and now. Paul's letters communicate both the workings and will of God, but always from a personal perspective.

Now in communities of faith there has always been a tendency for folks to gravitate to others like them. We feel most comfortable on familiar ground, and that's probably natural. In conversation we may discover we grew up in the same time period or in the same geographical area. Maybe we do a similar kind of work and like to travel to the same places. It seems easier for us to understand particular individuals, and they to understand us, because of our similarities. And that's often good. It's a comforting feeling.

On the other hand we may, at first, have challenges in relating to persons who are different from us. Their experiences in life may be so dissimilar from ours that we feel a gap or distance. We hear or see them going about things in ways that are unfamiliar to us. Their skills and talents may lie in different areas from our own. We may wish they might be more like us, as if **we** are the standard.

Certainly some people are harder to figure out, to understand. Likely, they may have the same challenge with us. Yet, to Paul this diversity among people is something positive, something to celebrate. When there is a basic unity in the fellowship, a unity in and through Christ Jesus, he tells us that our differences are strengths and all are important to the functioning of the church.

He says, "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 the one Spirit.

"Indeed the body does not consist of one member but of many. 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. 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. 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?"

"But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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.' On the contrary... If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

What Paul tells us is here is instead of lamenting the differences among members of the congregation, we should come to appreciate the unique gifts and abilities represented. And while some persons may appear to be more important than others, he advises us not to apply outward standards in judging the worth of people. In reality, he says, all gifts are ultimately from the same Spirit, and each gift, no matter how humble, if offered in the service of God, is important. Each person is integral to the functioning of the church as a whole.

There should be no pride gained at the expense of others. No one should consider him or herself better than another simply because they can do different things. If all gifts are from the same Spirit, then each person has been given intrinsic worth by God. Who are we to argue with that?

Should we deny the importance of other members of the church, we then overlook the gifts they have to offer. Should we be tempted to say that some are not necessary to our life together, we don't recognize that we would be lessened without them. No one is expendable. No one is without value.

I had a fellow in one of my churches who many people saw as difficult. He had limited education and would have been called then a "slow learner." Mervin wanted to do something for the church, but often volunteered for things where he was ill-matched for the task. Part of the problem was that he didn't understand his limitations in the way that others did.

One year we put our nominations list on the bulletin board in the Narthex. The committee had proposed their candidates, but we invited other nominations as well. Rarely were others ever added. We had a very capable person put forward to serve as Church President, skilled in planning, and effective in leadership.

On the last Sunday before nominations were closed, we were all surprised to see that Mervin had written in his own name as well. People were quietly aghast. How could Mervin ever believe he could do the job? Why he probably couldn't even lead the meetings. So there was some consternation that he put the congregation in the dilemma of having a contested race, one in which we all knew the outcome ahead of time. We also sensed that he wouldn't take losing well and would probably be angry if not be given the chance to do something important in the life of the church. So there we were with just two weeks to go.

Well, I did a lot of thinking and praying... and here's what finally happened. Like most churches we had trouble getting ushers on Sunday mornings and often had to recruit them at the very last minute. Our efforts were totally uncoordinated and our confusion probably showed to visitors.

Now this was one area where Mervin functioned adequately. So I got him aside and told him—completely without authority—that we really needed was someone to serve as our

"Head" Usher. Of course this position never really existed, but I presented the possibility to him anyway as a long shot.

He stopped and considered for a few moments. I had no idea what he was thinking. Finally, he said. "Yes, I can do that." After worship he went over to the nominations sheet and crossed out his name for Church President, saying to others, "I can't be president because I'm going to be the Head Usher." And he said it with some pride now that he had an important function in the life of the church, and even had a title to go with it. For him this signified that he did have worth and value.

Until he died several years later Mervin always arrived early, dressed well, put an usher pin on his lapel, and took complete charge of our program. He was particularly effective in getting people to volunteer largely because he was a big gangling fellow who had kind of a Boris Karloff look. His recruitment technique was to catch someone at the door and declare, "You gotta be an usher today." Most people just said "yes" and took a turn in doing something that really didn't ask all that much in the first place. They were just glad that someone was getting the job done. I don't suspect that there was anyone else in the congregation that could have done the job better. Mervin found his place.

On this day when our congregation grows a bit with these new folks welcomed through prayer, Paul's advice has a special significance to it. Clearly each will bring his or her unique gifts to the life of this congregation. Certainly we will benefit from their participation and I believe they will be all the stronger from ours. Together our witness will be strengthened in a variety of ways yet to be discovered.

This morning is a time to acknowledge anew that our diversity is a strength, and by offering it in service through Jesus' example, we do indeed "praise God from whom all blessings flow."