

“When Gifts Differ: Watch Out!”

1 Corinthians 12:12-31, 03/16/08

12For 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. ¹³For 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.

¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If 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. ¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The 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.” ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and 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; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And 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. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Yesterday I was sitting in my office in the church when I heard a great commotion outside in the street. When I turned to look out the window, there was a police car, shutting off traffic where Jefferson runs into Fulton, and just beyond there was a parade. Although the temperature was down in the 20's, the sun was bright, and they atmosphere joyous. There were festive floats heading down Fulton and a number of looney looking people outfitted in various costumes of Green, and some in sparkling green top hats looking like some variety of the Mad Hatter. No, these folks weren't celebrating Michigan State's near-upset of Wisconsin in the Big Ten Basketball Tournament yesterday – it was the St. Patrick's day parade, even though they won't break out the green haggis until Monday. But just seeing the parade was a wonderful thing.

So I feel badly for all of our faithful people at our 8:30 service. Everyone loves a parade – but we don't have one for you. I tried to hire a couple of kids to

wave palms for us, but I had no takers. We just don't seem to be able to get the children out to wave the palms for us this early in the morning, as we do at the 11:00 a.m. service. But all of you have seen those Palm Sunday parades and I can ask you to imagine it.

William Stringfellow, the renowned theologian who early in life was a distinguished lawyer, often strongly criticized the church. He was particularly feisty about Palm Sunday. He used to say that Christians go to church on Palm Sunday because they love the spectacle of a parade – not because they want to follow Jesus to the Cross. Many preachers took offense at Stringfellow saying that. But I think he's mainly right. We love the holiday spectacle of Palm Sunday – we don't want to follow where Jesus will go.

I'll be honest with you: I love Palm Sunday. After all, what can compare with a children's processional on Palm Sunday? It's an endless parade of exuberant joy. No matter how we instruct the children, you always have to be careful if you're sitting on an aisle or you might get a palm tip in your eye. All decorum goes out what's left of our stained-glass windows as the children stream down one aisle, place their palm branch on the communion table and skip down front. And it's no small miracle of logistics to get all of those little munchkins lined up in the narthex and ready to go. It's sort of like at a rodeo where you've got a bull crammed into a shoot and you finally open the gate and let him go.

There's nothing like Palm Sunday in the life of a congregation or in the life of the church. Someone once said that Palm Sunday has all the elements of a classic drama: great characters – frightened disciples stumbling along behind Jesus, cheering crowds, conspiring politicians – and behind it all the clash of huge civilizations and religions and worldviews. And in the center – in fact towering over it all – the figure of one lonely young man riding on a donkey, being celebrated on the way to his own death.

Where Jesus was going, as you know, was the culmination of Jesus's unique gifts and the decisions he made in how to use them. Like all of us, Jesus had many options from which to choose. And, like us, his choices were limited – his choices were delimited by his unique gifts and the times in which he lived. He could not become a mother or choose to go to the space station. But he could have been a carpenter or a stone cutter. He could have married and had a family, finding fulfillment in parenting. He would have had great support if he had led a rebellion and attempted to throw the Romans out of his homeland. But out of all his options, Jesus answered a call to place his relationship with God above all else. Somewhere around the age of thirty, when social custom dictated he should take up his deceased father's business and take care of his mother and brothers and

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sisters, Jesus became a seeker of God. He became a follower of John the Baptist, was baptized as a sign of his new direction, and spent time in the wilderness discerning his destiny. He gathered a following of fellow seekers. His reputation as a religious teacher spread throughout Galilee.

All of this is to say that Jesus recognized his gifts and he used his unique gifts of vision and leadership and wisdom to the highest possible degree he could for God. I suspect that had Jesus lived longer, he would have had more to say about the use of our gifts. As it was, he did leave us that powerful teaching about the Master who had to leave on a lengthy business trip and entrusted various “talents” to his servants. Depending upon their abilities, he gave them one talent or five or ten. And when the Master returned, he demanded an accounting of how each servant had used the gifts he had given them. And you remember that some could show that they used their gifts very well and were rewarded, but one had taken his talent and hidden it, afraid to use or lose it, and the Master was greatly displeased – and what little that servant had was taken away. God wants us to use the gifts we have been given. We either use our gifts, or lose them. Jesus used his gifts and God was able to unique use him because of it. God has given each one of us gifts as well, and we’re meant to use them.

How are we to use our gifts? The explanation of this was left to the Apostle Paul who found that one of the churches he founded was embroiled in controversy around just such a question. Know why most of the New Testament was written? Because people couldn’t get along. That’s what happened in Corinth and caused Paul to write. As some wit once quipped, “Where two or three are gathered together, you’ll find a church fight.” Where there are people, there is conflict – and there are also keys to learning how to work through conflict. Old Paul had to think his way through this matter of the gifts God has given us. Why is it that a church like Corinth has everything it needs, but still ends up embroiled in controversy? Corinth had teachers and preachers and organizers and helpers and healers and people who knew how to get things done and people who spoke in tongues. They had all the ingredients. But they were at each other’s throats. It wasn’t just the normal friction that occurs when people get together. They were denigrating one another, ridiculing the importance of each other’s gifts. So this beautiful new creation Paul was trying to grow, this new thing called the church, was at war. They could hardly have a fellowship meal together.

I know a pastor who says, “I’m an expert in church conflict. I’m a Baptist pastor.” Tongue-in-cheek, he likes to claim that Baptists don’t believe what Paul taught: that we should “be in agreement and that there be no divisions among” us, or that we should “be united in the same mind.” He loves to say that the usual

form of church growth for Baptists is to have a church fight, divide the church, and have half of them go off and start a new church. You can tell he has fun with his brand of church. He tells the story of how, when he was a young and foolish pastor, he was sitting in his office at the church he served when one his most unflappable leaders bolts through his door. She was ‘flapped!’ “Larry, you better get down here. We can’t pull them apart!”

He says, “I hurry back down to the basement where not ten minutes before eight women and I finished a planning meeting for Vacation Bible School, our annual neighborhood outreach. Two women, one tall, one short, both wide, are standing nose to nose, bug-eyed and red-faced. The short one is hitting the tall one on the side of her bare bicep with one of the paint paddles we stockpiled for arts and crafts. With every ‘whack!’ The short one says, “You’re stepping on my dignity!” (Whack!) “You’re stepping on my dignity!” (Whack!) “You’re stepping on my dignity!” (Whack!). The tall one’s arm is bright pink, a welt is forming, and I see her hands curling into fists.

He says, “I did what I have since learned never to do. I step between them. I take the paint paddle in my hand and say something stupid like ‘we may need this later’ and ask the short one to come visit with me in my office. I’m thinking visiting with each separately will help them cool down and prepare the way for a reconciliation. Not a bad plan, but it didn’t work. Well, I suppose it did prevent twelve rounds of extreme boxing in the basement of the church. But, long story short, the short one never came back again, the tall one was unfairly branded a bully, and people took one side or the other as the story spread through the church.” What were they fighting about? Over whether to tell the stories of Jesus first and then do crafts, or do the crafts first then tell the stories at Vacation Bible School.

He says “That church! The ‘paint-paddle battle’ was just one of the fights I had to referee during my five years as their pastor. In the trade, we call them ‘well-intentioned dragons,’ people trying to help, but they leave a swath of angry damage you have to clean up. Every church, every organization, has them. Truth is, we’re all well-intentioned dragons at times.”^[1]

The church is a family, and families fight. You can’t just say “Don’t fight.” But fighting is not always a bad thing. If you’ve worked with families, you’ve seen that the successful family is not the family which never fights. Families who never fight usually have a coerced peace or are in such denial they’re a powder keg waiting to blow. The healthy family is the family which has healthy conflict, who talk about their differences instead of denying them, who work through conflicts

with mutual respect, and who are mature enough to put the common good higher than getting their own way.

And Paul gives us the key for healthy conflict whether we're a family or a church: remember that you are part of the body of Christ. As he tries to tell the Corinthians, you are all members of the same body, the body of Christ. The toe can't tell the eye it isn't needed. The arm cannot despise the foot for not being the same part. The mouth ought not to mock the ear. All are needed and necessary. Whether you are fighting over beliefs or values or about spiritual gifts, remember that you are part of Christ's body and try to see Christ in one another. That way you won't demonize one another. For we need each other. We who are made in God's image were made for community, for relationship with one other. We belong to one another because we belong to Christ. And it's in the crucible of the church that we learn to love as God loved us, which means forgiveness, forbearance, patience, humility, reconciliation, restoration, and service.

You remember the story about the old monastery which was down to just three monks? Years had passed since anyone joined the order. Its time had passed and these three monks figured they would be the last. The abbot in charge shared his sadness with a friend, the neighboring rabbi. The rabbi looked surprised. "Oh no," he said. "Your order will not die. Your monastery will not close. I have had a revelation that the Messiah is among you. No, no, you will not close!"

The Abbot returned to the other monks scratching his head, and told his two colleagues. They were all astonished. And suddenly, they began to see each other in an entirely new light. They began to take care of each other as never before, as if they were taking care of the Messiah. They listened to each other as they had never listened before, as if they were listening to the Messiah. They blessed one another as they had never blessed one another before, as if they were blessing the Messiah. Visitors to the monastery noticed the quality of the monks care for one another. It was beautiful. And it was contagious. People wanted to experience what they experienced. People wanted to join, and when they did, they were told the secret: "Sh-h-h-h-h! The Messiah is here among us." And each met the Messiah in the other until all were drawn close in the love of God.

If you want to follow Jesus beyond the Palm Sunday parade, remember that you are part of the very body of Christ, and begin to see Christ in everyone you meet. Next Sunday we celebrate Easter, the resurrection of Christ. And this is the secret Paul opening shared, which is the key to our unity here: Christ is risen. Christ is alive! The Messiah is right here among us. And when we know that, we

no longer regard one another from a human point of view. We see one another in the very light of Jesus Christ.

[1] *“Power Loss,” Dr. Larry Bethune.*