

## VARIED AND UNIFIED

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Series C)

January 16, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The epistle lesson for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany comes from *Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, chapter 12, verses 1 through 11. This is part of several chapters that deal with congregational life. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From 1 Corinthians 12, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>1</sup> Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. <sup>2</sup> You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. <sup>3</sup> Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.

<sup>4</sup> Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; <sup>5</sup> and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; <sup>6</sup> and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. <sup>7</sup> To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. <sup>8</sup> For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, <sup>9</sup> to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, <sup>10</sup> to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. <sup>11</sup> All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Dear saints,

We need each other. I need you. You need me. I need the person over there and the other person over there. And you need the person over there and the other person over there. And it's not because you're really special. And it's not because I'm really special. And it's not because the person over there and the other person over there are really special. Nope. It's because God has made us one body in Jesus Christ. Every baptized believer in Jesus Christ is forgiven of their sins and united together in Jesus Christ

We are one body in Jesus Christ. This is true. And this is the central teaching of 1 Corinthians 12. We were all baptized into one body (12:13). That is because we are baptized into Jesus Christ. And if I am baptized into Jesus Christ, and you are baptized into Jesus Christ, and the person over there and the other person over there are also baptized into Jesus Christ, then we are all baptized into one body, and we are members of one another. Therefore, we need each other.

And I think this is a very timely message for us.

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During this Epiphany season, the epistle lessons all come from 1 Corinthians. The Scripture readings do this sometimes. Instead of jumping around each week to find passages that fit the theme of the day, the epistle readings often follow a continuous reading through one letter. In this case, we're not going through the entire letter of 1 Corinthians, because it's one of the longer letters, but over the next six weeks we will hear most of chapters 12 through 15. And I think it will be good for us to consider these texts together. I'm not sure yet if all six sermons will be from 1 Corinthians, but probably at least four of the next six will be. For sure, this week and the next two Sundays will be. So I would encourage you during your personal devotions to read through 1 Corinthians. Reading all of it will give you some context of what was going on in that congregation, and especially read chapters 12 through 15. It would help to even read these chapters several times, maybe once a week. Then we can consider these chapters together. Instead of me just talking to you for twenty minutes, once a week, you can ask questions or share things you notice. I would especially encourage you to come to the adult Sunday school class, and we can walk through this together.

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I think this is a very timely message for us. Chapters 12 through 14 focus on congregational life. All around the world, especially over these last two years, Christians have been struggling with what it means to be the Church. And I think we've seen a problem that has been there for a long time, but has especially been exposed by the pandemic. And it's this: at best, we think of the congregation as a club, and, at worst, we think of it as an event.

Being a member of a club is optional. Usually there is a degree of commitment in joining a club. Or within a club, you might take on certain responsibilities. You join a club, because it's something that interests you, and you want to share that interest with other people. And if, after some time, your interest shifts to something else, that's okay. You can resign from the club, and they might miss you, but you're free to do that. It's optional. Sometimes we think of church that way. You join a congregation because it fits what you want, but if you decide you want a different style of worship, or maybe you just like the people better at some other congregation, then you move on. This is wrong. And it's not just wrong, it's sinful. I should say that sometimes there are valid reasons to transfer to another congregation. But many times, when someone thinks they have a valid reason, they're just rationalizing their decision, when the reasons are actually invalid. So sometimes we treat congregations like clubs that we can freely choose between. You lose interest, someone offends you, or some other club just seems more attractive. So you back away from your commitments and take back your time. In a club you are free to do that.

Attending an event is, of course, even less commitment. And you might even think of church this way. It's just something you do. You go to a concert or a sporting event to get your entertainment fix, and you go to church to fill up your spiritual tank. And I suppose that's better than nothing. If that's what you're doing here, we're still glad you're here. But that falls short of the biblical teaching on the congregation. Or you might feel like you don't even need to come here. You can get your fix on the livestream, or by reading some devotional materials at home, or just by watching a sunset.

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We should consider what Scripture has to say about the congregation. If you read through 1 Corinthians, you will see that the congregation in Corinth was, in many ways, messed up. The apostle Paul spends the first four chapters dealing with divisions in the congregation. He also teaches some great doctrine in those chapters, so it's interesting to see how he uses doctrine to

address practical problems. Chapters 5 through 7 deal with sexual immorality, lawsuits, marriage, and divorce. These were, and still are, some difficult topics. And, again, Paul addresses them by teaching doctrine. It's not just a matter of him saying, "Hey! Quit doing bad things and start doing good things."

In every case, he exposes what's really going on, why God's Law is the way it is, and why it is really good for us to live according to God's Law. Then chapters 8 through 10 deal with idolatry, that is, the worship of false gods. We don't have a problem with idolatry, so you can ignore that section. I'm being sarcastic, of course. Again, Paul deals with it theologically, because the worship of false gods is obviously a theological problem. Finally, chapters 11 through 14 deal with congregational life. Really, most of the letter has been dealing with congregational life. There were divisions between members. There was sexual immorality among the members. There were lawsuits between members. And members were, apparently, accusing other members of idolatry. Then chapters 11 through 14 deal specifically with worship. Their division and hostility toward one another was manifesting itself in disorderly worship (14:26-40). Recognizing that should give us some insight into why Paul says what he does.

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There are a variety of gifts, services, and activities, "But it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone" (12:6). Paul lists, "utterance of wisdom ... utterance of knowledge ... faith ... gifts of healing ... the working of miracles ... prophecy ... the ability to distinguish spirits ... various kinds of tongues ... the interpretation of tongues" (12:8-10). Some of these sound rather extraordinary.

The key point that Paul emphasizes, over and over again, is that every gift is empowered by the same Spirit, that is, the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. Seven times in this passage, Paul uses a phrase like, "The same Spirit," "The same Lord," "The same God," or "One Spirit." Seven times he emphasizes that every spiritual gift comes the same source. And when we consider the context of the letter, we can probably figure out why he does this. It's because members were claiming to have these gifts, but using them against one another. I admit that's reading between the lines a little bit, but only a little bit, because Paul has already made a pretty big deal of their divisions. It would be foolish of us to ignore this; it looms over the whole letter. So when Paul emphasizes, over and over again, that it is the same Spirit who empowers all these gifts, his point is that these gifts should not disagree with one another. If one person claims to have the utterance of wisdom, another claims to have the utterance of knowledge, and another claims to have prophecy, but they all disagree, are these gifts really from the Holy Spirit?

They could all be wrong, but at most, only one of them can be right, because it is the same Holy Spirit who empowers these gifts, and the Holy Spirit is not going to disagree with himself. Now, I'm not saying that all of these gifts are bogus. Paul doesn't say that either. That's why I'm not going to say it. But he's making them deal with the question, "If these different people all claim to be speaking for the Holy Spirit, but they say different things, do they really have the gift they claim to have? Is all this really from the Holy Spirit?" The obvious answer is that it cannot be.

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Now, at this point you might be thinking, "Pastor, I thought you said this was a timely message for us. But no one here is claiming to have a word from the Holy Spirit and kicking you out of the pulpit." True enough. Nor do we have chaotic worship services where multiple people are trying to take control all at once. I think it's safe to say that we have a much more harmonious life together than the Corinthians did. And I am very thankful for this. What I mean

when I say that I think this is very timely for us, is that the doctrine Paul uses to address the Corinthian confusion still applies to us. It teaches us what the congregation is and how we should live in it.

The congregation is a body. And it's not just any body, but it is the body of Jesus Christ. I'm stealing now from next week's Scripture reading. We'll read more about this next week, but learning that the congregation is the body of Christ helps us to understand this first part of chapter 12. It helps us to see that there are various gifts, there are various services, and there are various activities. And yet, we are united in one body. In fact, if we are, indeed, one body, then we must have various gifts, various services, and various activities. We cannot all be the same, because if we were all the same, then we would just be a useless collection of ears or a pile of toenails. Instead, we are a body with various members who have various gifts, various services, and various activities.

One of the things we learn from this is that the congregation is a gift. God has made you a member of this body. When we talk about the church being the body of Christ, we don't simply mean that every Christian in the history of world is united to Jesus Christ and to one another. That's true. And the value of that is that, wherever you go, if you find Christians there, they are your brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. And we are still united with the saints of God who have fallen asleep in Jesus Christ. This is good and can be extremely comforting. But the point Paul makes here is that, at the local, congregational level, we are the body of Christ.

This congregation is the body of Christ. It's not like we are a tiny fraction of the body of Christ, which really only consists of all Christians. That's not right. Sometimes we think that way. And it's true that the universal Church is the body of Christ. But, more often, when the New Testament speaks of the Church as the body of Christ, it's talking about a single congregation. Later in chapter 12, Paul says to the Corinthians, "You are the body of Christ" (12:27). It's interesting that he doesn't say, "*We* are the body of Christ," including himself in it, because he's not with them there, and he's not a member of their congregation. He's writing to them from outside their congregation, so he says, "*You* are the body of Christ." So we can also say that this congregation, right here, right now, is the body of Christ. We are not just a part of the body. *We are* the body. If anything is missing from us, it's not the millions or billions of Christians all over the world; it's the actual members of this congregation who are absent. That's all. We are the body of Christ. The real Jesus Christ, who was crucified for us and was raised from the dead, is here now, among us and in us.

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Now this has profound implications for how we think of our life together and how we live together as a congregation. We'll save some of those implications next week, but today we need to say something about service in the congregation. Church membership is a vocation. It's something God calls you to. When we answer that calling, we commit ourselves to service in the congregation. That service begins with being present at worship and praying for one another.

You might think that you are the only one who suffers if you are absent from worship. But that's not true. Those who gather without you suffer your absence. It's hard to describe this. Maybe I'll figure it out more next week. And I'll say something next week about how Covid affects this too. So if I don't say everything you think I should, just wait a week. After next Sunday you can get mad at me.

Part of the issue is this: worship is a participatory thing. It's not like going to a show where you just sit, watch, and listen. Some parts of worship, like singing, confessing, and responsive readings, are obviously participatory, but also the silent, passive parts. When we hear the Word

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of God together or receive the Lord's Supper together, we're experiencing that as one body. It's kind of like the difference between eating supper alone and eating supper with your family. Actually, it's more intense than that. It's the difference between eating supper with your foot attached or not. If you could somehow detach your foot from the whole eating and digesting process, it wouldn't get the same nutrients as the rest of your body, and your whole body would suffer. So you are providing a service to the congregation and to the rest of the members when you are present to hear, sing, confess, and pray together.

Then you are also called to pray for one another. Every member of the body is called to these two things: worship and prayer.

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Beyond this, there are various other services or activities that you may be called to. And these differ from member to member. Some services are outlined in our church constitution.

There are various councils or committees. As a congregation, we have committed ourselves to maintain these offices, because we see them as necessary for the good order of the congregation. Right now, the nominating committee is seeking nominees for these offices. They have a difficult task. If they ask you to accept a nomination, please consider it. The duties for many of our offices are outlined in our church constitution. If you don't have a copy, pick one up. They're the blue books on the back table. If you have not been asked yet, but you are willing to serve, you can make their job easier and let them know that you are willing to serve. There is a great variety of services. Some are a big commitment; others require very little. Some require monthly meetings. Some even require work between those meetings. Then there are other committees that only meet once a year. When you are asked to serve, don't say "yes" before you know what the duties are. Find out exactly what is being asked of you. Consider if you are willing to do what is asked, and then give your answer.

We elect these offices at the annual meeting, which is coming up on February 6. The annual meeting should be a priority for every voting member. Voting members, by the way, are those "who are eighteen years of age and not under church censure." Sometimes the meeting seems boring or inconsequential. As for it being boring, you just need to get over that. Most of the important things in life are boring. And it is certainly not inconsequential. This meeting dictates how our congregation operates. We decide who will serve. We remember and consider what we have done in the last year. We look forward to the next year. We decide how we will spend what we have mutually given. If you give offering, even one dollar a year, you have a responsibility to come to the annual meeting. You don't actually decide what to do with your dollar. Instead, you participate in the decision of what we do with all the dollars.

There are also various services that are not outlined in the constitution, but which are valuable to our life together. For example, we need more ushers. If you can usher, look at what the responsibilities are, and put your name on the sign-up sheet on the back table. We also need one or two more people to learn how to operate the livestream. This would be to fill in sometimes, maybe up to once a month. If you are interested in this, talk to me. There also seems to be a need for drivers. Some of our members don't drive, or they might drive very little, especially in winter. If you are willing to give a person a ride to church, talk to me. And there are really a great many good things that we could do as a congregation if members are willing to do them. You may have an idea of something that would be a great service to our congregation, our community, or the Church at large. The first thing you should do is recognize that it might not work, or someone might say, "No." Most good ideas, it seems, don't work out in the end. And if

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you accept that possibility, then you should share your idea with me or someone from the church council.

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Okay. This is going to be a bit of a clunky conclusion, because we're not really done. We'll pick it up again next week. But I want to remind you of the central truth here: the congregation is the body of Christ. This body is a gift to you. And in this body of Christ, we have forgiveness. Whenever we talk about vocation, that is, the calling of God on our lives, we recall the ways we have sinned in our vocations. Have you sinned against the body of Christ? Yeah. Have you sinned against other members of the body? Yeah. What do we do with that? We confess it. We confess it before God, and where we have sinned against individual members, we confess it to them, and we forgive one another. When we confess our sins in the body of Christ, we are not far from forgiveness, because the body of Christ was crucified and risen for our forgiveness.

This is our life in Jesus Christ. This is our life in the body of Christ. We enter through Baptism, having our sins washed away by the blood of Christ. We enter into fellowship with Christ and with one another. Within this body we still sin against our Lord, and we still sin against one another. And so we live in continual repentance, confessing our sin and receiving forgiveness. You are forgiven. And being forgiven, bear fruits in keeping with repentance. Serve one another in humility. And when you sin again, confess again and be forgiven again. This is our shared life in the body of Christ. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.