

The Ensemble
I Corinthians 12:12-31a
Colebrook Congregational Church
January 24, 2016 / Third Sunday of Epiphany

Calling this Letter the First Letter to the Corinthians is a bit of a misnomer. It is the first letter that still exists. You see, Corinth was the Sin City of the ancient world. It was Las Vegas. And Paul was having to constantly write to them or even go there in person to solve some kind of problem or redirect their actions. First Corinthians is actually the second or maybe even third letter he wrote to them, and we know this because he refers to a previous letter he's already sent them. And in fact, Second Corinthians, isn't the next he letter he sent them, scholars think, because in that letter he refers not only to what we call First Corinthians, but to other letters he has sent them, and grammatically, it seems he is referring to at least one letter between First Corinthians and Second Corinthians. Scholars think there were possibly at least five letters he may have written to those pesky Corinthians living in Sin City. Unfortunately, all but two have been lost to time.

We know that Paul wrote this during his extended stay in Ephesus, on the west coast of Turkey, in the mid-fifties. We know this because of who he sends and talks about. There are whole portions of these Epistles in the New Testament that are not bothered with for preaching on Sundays. They are what I call the housekeeping verses. It's where Paul or Peter or James write personal notes to the people he knows at the destination. Stuff like, tell Priscilla thank you for let us use her house for worship, or hey, I forget to settle a debt with so-and-so, and could someone handle that for me? You can't preach on stuff like that, but it helps scholars to place things into a timeline. In this Letter, Paul speaks of using Timothy as a messenger, and also mention Apollos, and because of the Book of Acts, we know when and where Paul was hanging out with both Timothy and Apollos.

So, Paul is writing this letter, and as usual he's upset with the Church in Corinth. It's usually because they have backslid into pagan ways, being internally divisive, or otherwise causing a ruckus. Our selection today comes from Paul addressing the internally divisive issue.

Chapter 12 is all about the Many Gifts of the One Spirit, which is part of a

larger section, chapters 12 through 14, where Paul is discussing the Use of Spiritual Gifts. Our selection is Paul illustrating his point of the earlier section, the truth of diversity in unity, by using the image of the human body. Several parts are very different from one another, yet they all come from the same entity. He tells us that unity is effected by the sacraments. With the Spirit, we attain unity with Christ through Baptism and with one another through Communion.

A human body needs all of its organs, each serving a function. The whole is weakened with the loss of any single part. The same is true for the Church and its various members. Each of us has an indispensable function without which the whole is hampered. Therefore, each member should honor the contributions of the others, because of their differences. Do not seek uniformity in the life of the church, but unity in its diversity. The differences, when together, like the different parts of the body, complement one another. Paul then lists off different body parts, to illustrate how a body would be crippled with the loss of any part. And each part is honored, no matter how little we may think of that part!

It is a common trope in entertainment to build a team out of different kinds of people. The most recent in our culture is the Marvel Cinematic Universe, with the Avengers movies. You have a team of very different people with very different roles or gifts or functions. There's Iron Man, the rich guy in a suit of armor and lots of resources. There's the super-strong and invincible Hulk, smashing his way through things. The alien demigod with his big hammer. The Black Widow spying. The Ant-Man, who can be really small. Then there's the super-human Captain America with his leadership and clarity of purpose. The Avengers team would be very different if it was made up of just people like the Captain, or just Iron Men. It is their diversity in unity that makes them so effective.

But what is probably a closer illustration to us are the Muppets. One of my earliest memories is watching the Muppet Show with my parents. Think about it. A huge ensemble cast. Straight man and leader Kermit, the temperamental diva Miss Piggy, the naïve and bad joke-telling Fozzy the Bear, the dry, piano-playing Rowlf the Dog, loyal stage manager Scooter, and

Gonzo...whatever he is! There is the wild Animal opposite the super cool and chill Dr. Teeth and the Electric Mayhem.

None of them are the Muppets by themselves! Even Kermit the Frog cannot provide all that is the Muppet experience by himself. Not Miss Piggy, not Fozzy, none of them solely. And does it feel like the Muppets without Sam the Eagle's commentary of the proceedings? Without the clueless Honeydew blowing up hapless Beaker? Without the Swedish Chef jork jork jorking? Or Statler & Waldorf heckling?

I know that I just read off a long list, but that's the point that Paul is trying to make! Think about how the Muppets would be different if they were all like Miss Piggy, diva-ing around. Or all like Animal? Or Kermit? I admit that a whole show of Honeydew & Beaker or the Swedish Chef causing mayhem would be entertaining, but it wouldn't be the Muppets. Something would be missing. Watching the Muppet Show and then the early movies, it would not feel complete or right if I did not see all the Muppets. It was all of them, together, that made it the Muppets, not just one, not a few. All of them!

That's what Paul wants us to remember! The membership of a church should not be homogenous! We are all supposed to have different gifts and different skills, and those differences, when taken together, make the whole a better one, a more complete whole, a more effective church. I think this is a timely selection for us here, especially after the Annual Meeting and the election of new church officers and committee members, starting off a new program year for our church, with people in new roles and new contributions and new participation. Moderator, Sexton, Clerk, Deacon, Treasurer, Choir, Committee members & chairs, Organist. As Paul says, the loss of any one, would damage the whole. All of us must not let the differences divide or discourage us. We should take these words of Paul to heart and remember them as we work together to move our Church forward this year.

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer.

O God, we give You thanks for Paul's words and lesson, and we pray that we remember them when we work with each other, reminding us that while other

people are different from us, think differently, act differently, and work differently, we are all working together towards the same goals for Our Church. And may Your Spirit be among us and help us to remember that everyone is needed. Everyone has a contribution to make, and no matter what it is, it is of value to the whole. Amen

Intercessory Prayer

[Pause]

Creator God, you call us to love and serve You with all of the gifts that you have given us, and through loving your creation and our sisters and brothers. Open our hearts in compassion and receive our thanksgivings and petitions on behalf of our church, our community, and the world.

We thank You for Your blessings, and for the lessons You teach us. We thank You for those You have sent to help us in our daily lives. And we thank You for the opportunities to serve others, seeing to their needs.

We know that we are not perfect, so pray for forgiveness for falling short. We pray for your guidance to live our lives in more loving ways.

We pray for all who are in need. We pray for the recovery of those who are unwell of mind, of body, or of spirit, and we pray for their caregivers, and we pray that you move us to help them in any way that our gifts allow. We pray for abundance for those who are hungry. We pray for those who are lost, so that they may find guidance. We pray for the refugees around the world, please see them to safer places. We pray for those who protect us, please keep them safe as they have kept us safe. And we pray that you help us to be instruments of your divine love.

We especially pray for:

Fin Daly

Cody Thomas

Hear our prayers, both spoken and unspoken, you know the prayers of our hearts. And free us from the grip of distractions, that we may be of service to others in your name in our lives. Amen

Psalm 19

19:1 The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

19:2 Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.

19:3 There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;

19:4 yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,

19:5 which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

19:6 Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

19:7 The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple;

19:8 the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;

19:9 the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

19:10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

19:11 Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

19:12 But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.

19:13 Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

12:12 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. 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, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 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; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.

If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 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. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts.