

1 Corinthians 12:12-21, 26-27

Dear Members of the Body of Christ,

Chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians talks about the work of the Holy Spirit. Near the beginning of the chapter Paul reminds us that the greatest work the Holy Spirit does is his work of bringing us to faith in Jesus, **no one can say “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.** Once the Holy Spirit has brought us to faith he’s not finished with us. He continues to work through the word and sacraments to strengthen and keep us in faith, and he gives each and every Christian at least one spiritual gift to be used for the common good. Paul reminds us that these spiritual gifts are gifts of grace. They are not earned by us through prayer or fasting or by anything we do. They are undeserved gifts that he distributes to each Christian **just as he determines**, not us.

Now, since the Holy Spirit has given us gifts, how are we to view them, how are we to view ourselves? Paul says we are to view ourselves as part of something bigger than ourselves. You, each and every one of you who believes in Jesus, you are a part of the body of Christ.

What is the body of Christ? We confess it every Sunday. We confess that we believe in the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints. That’s the body of Christ. It’s what we often call the invisible church. It’s the church that is made up of everyone that the Holy Spirit has brought to faith in Jesus. Paul says, **we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body-- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.**

Unlike the visible church, the body of Christ is made up of all those who believe and are baptized, all those and only those who trust in Jesus as their savior. In the body of Christ there is no such thing as a hypocrite because God knows the heart. In the body of Christ it doesn’t matter where you came from or what you look like or how young or old you are. In the body of Christ there are people from China, Iran, Venezuela, and North Korea joined together with people from England, the United States, South Korea and Japan. Although their countries may be at odds with each other the Christians in these countries and every country on the face of the earth are united in one body by their common faith in Jesus and one day we will all live together in the perfect peace of the new heaven and the new earth that God will establish.

When the Holy Spirit brought you to faith and showered you with gifts of grace he made you a part of the body of Christ. It’s great to be a part of something big. It’s great to be a part of the winning team. We are on Jesus’ team and he has already won the victory for us. But the body of Christ is so big and there are so many gifted people who are a part of it that sometimes we might feel like we’re just sitting on the bench, that we aren’t a very important part of the body; we might even think that we are expendable. Paul wants to make sure that we don’t feel that way. He wants us to recognize our importance in the body.

**If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.** This is a picture of a person who doesn’t recognize the importance of the gifts the Holy Spirit has given them. They are comparing themselves to others and the gifts God gave them and concluding that they aren’t very important. They are thinking, “If only I had the gifts that person has, if only I could sing or play an instrument like they do, then I would be an important part of the body. If only I could talk to strangers like they do, or offer gems of wisdom at Bible class like they do, then I would be an important part of the body. But as it is, I don’t contribute anything; I might as well not even be a part of the body.” Paul says just because you might think that way, doesn’t make it true. As long as you are trusting in Jesus for salvation you are a part of

his body and the gifts the Holy Spirit has given you are important, otherwise he would not have given you those gifts.

Comparing ourselves to others and wishing we could be like them because it seems that their gifts are more important than ours, is just false humility covering up the sin of envy. God never tells us to compare ourselves with others. We can always find someone who seems better than we are and so we become envious. We can always find someone who seems worse than we are to look down on and make ourselves feel superior. God forbids us to make such comparisons. He says there is only one comparison we can make. We are to compare ourselves to him. He says **be Holy as I am Holy**. Love others as I have loved you. And in regard to Spiritual gifts, remember that **if the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.** To think that your gifts are unimportant and to be envious of others is to say that God made a mistake. He's the one that made you who you are and gave you the gifts you have and he did that with a purpose in mind for you and his body. If everyone had the same gifts it would be like a body that was one big eye, it couldn't hear, or smell or move, it would be useless. **Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it,** an important part with a God-given purpose.

Satan loves to take us to extremes. He wants us either to envy others, or to look down on others. He tempts those who don't have very flashy gifts to think that they and their gifts are worthless. He tempts those who have the flashy gifts to think that they are God's gift to the church and to look down on others, to think that the church couldn't get along without them.

Paul says, **the eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!"** The eye would never get anything it sees if there were no hand to pick it up. The head and the rest of the body would have difficulty getting anywhere if there were no feet. It might function, but it certainly would not function well. Every part of the body is there for a reason and if one part is injured or lost, the whole body is affected. Just stub your toe and that lesson becomes painfully obvious.

The point is pretty clear. Each Christian is given certain gifts by the Holy Spirit so that he or she can function as a certain part of the body of Christ. God has distributed these gifts as he knows best. There is no room for either envying or being judgmental. Every gift God gives is important and the body of Christ will function properly only when each Christian uses whatever gifts they have to serve God and each other.

Someone once used the Old Testament Levites as an example of this truth. It was their job to take care of the Tabernacle, the tent church that Israel used in the wilderness. That meant that when the pillar of cloud rose off of the Tabernacle and started to move, everything had to be taken apart and packed up so it could be moved to the next place God would take them. Everyone had a job to do. Some had a flashy job, like being among those who got to carry the Ark of the Covenant. Others had jobs that it would seem no one would ever notice, like carrying one of the tent pegs for the Tabernacle. Just suppose that you had the job of carrying the tent peg from the northeast corner of the Tabernacle. What would happen if you began to think to yourself, "This isn't a very important job. Anybody, even a young child could do this job. I'm kind of tired of doing it." Or maybe someone who had the job of carrying the Ark or the Altar made some snide remark about how much more important their job was than yours. What if you said, "I think that the next time it's time to move the Tabernacle I just won't do my job. I'm sure

no one will ever notice.” What would happen when it came time to set up the tabernacle? When they got ready to fasten the ropes on the northeast corner they wouldn’t be able to do it. The whole community would have to wait to worship at the Tabernacle until a replacement tent peg could be made or found.

Every gift God gives is given for a purpose. Every gift is important. The hymn writer said it well when he considered the Scripture lessons before us today and wrote, *“If you cannot speak like angels, If you cannot preach like Paul, You can tell the love of Jesus; You can say he died for all. If you cannot rouse the wicked With the Judgment's dread alarms, You can lead the little children To the Savior's waiting arms. If you cannot be a watchman, Standing high on Zion's wall, Pointing out the path to heaven, Off'ring life and peace to all, With your prayers and with your offerings You can do what God demands; You can be like faithful Aaron, Holding up the prophet's hands.”* The prayers of the shut in for the work of the church are just as important as those who are doing the work. Those who pray each month for our outreach work are just as important as those who actually make the visits. The body of Christ can function properly only when each Christian is using their gifts to serve God and each other.

You, each one of you here today who believe in Jesus, are a part of the body of Christ. Each of you has gifts given by the Holy Spirit to enable you to do something that the body needs. Strive to determine what gifts you have been given and then use them to the glory of God. And as you do, remember, **if one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.**

As we walk together as believers united in a common faith, working together as part of a congregation and a Synod, let these words always be on our minds, **You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.**