

Scriptures: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Uniqueness is a Blessing

Last week we talked about how everyone has gifts and skills. The uniqueness of each person is a blessing which is given by our Creator God to the whole of humanity. When we use our unique gifts and skill-sets for the greater good – the common good – then we're able to in turn bless others. Along with that, when we're focused on Jesus Christ, and point others through using our gifts and skills – our words and deeds – into closer relationship to God through Him, that brings Him glory. That's something we should do, and should like to do! Paul talks about some spiritual gifts we've been given in the first part of the twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians. Some of those include wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, the ability to prophesy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in tongues, and interpreting tongues. This week we're going to dig just a little deeper into the idea that we ought to be using our gifts and skills in service to Him, and each other. If you have a Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. **Read 1 Cor. 12:12-31a.**

The passage today picks up where we left off last week. Paul, writing to the church at Corinth, uses the imagery of a human body as a metaphor for the church. He says, "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts, and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ," (1 Cor. 12:12). This example from Paul illustrates the unity and diversity of the different spiritual gifts exercised by God's people, who are all members of the one body of Christ, which is the Church. You know, some people get kind-of a warped view of what the Church is, and who leads it. Some people associate it with a building – it's not a building, it's a group of people. There are people who refer to a church officer as being the "Head of the Church," and that's not quite accurate either. Paul writes that Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church. In Ephesians 1:22-23, he says, "And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way."

He explains this in our text today, writing, "For 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," (1 Cor. 12:13). Many of you grew up in the United Methodist Church, or its predecessor denominations – the Methodist Episcopal Church, or Evangelical United Brethren Church. Both of those churches practiced – the United Methodist Church continues to practice – infant baptism. I didn't grow up in that tradition, mine was more along the lines of a Baptist tradition. Even though I didn't grow up in the Methodist tradition, I see the value and wisdom of it. When we remember our baptism, and are thankful, when we accept in faith what Jesus Christ did for us once for all time on Good Friday's cross, and let Him be King of us, He puts His Holy Spirit inside us.

The Holy Spirit regenerates and renews us. He unites us with Christ as a part of Christ's visible body in the world today – the Church. Friends, we are, quite literally the hands and feet of Jesus Christ in the world today.

Viceroy and Regent

When you read those Gospel accounts of all the things Jesus did while He was Incarnate on earth there's a lot of stuff. He's helping people, healing people, loving the undesired ones of society. We know Jesus is the King, right? I think sometimes because we live in a republic led by a president, we miss connections we'd make with the Bible if we lived in other places, under other systems of government. Jesus was, is, and will always be the King. He was the King of the Jews, He's the King of you and me, and someday every knee is going to bow and tongue confess that He's the King of everything and everyone. Whether they like that or not, that's the reality of the situation. In a kingdom, a monarchy, when the king leaves the country to take a trip, let's say, he usually has someone, a son, a daughter, perhaps a trusted advisor or friend, who is a placeholder in his behalf. Kind of like how when our Presidents go and get these colonoscopies and they leave the Vice President temporarily in charge as Acting President. In a monarchy they would call that person a viceroy or regent, they act in the interests and on the behalf of the king until he returns to the palace and takes his rightful place back on the throne.

So we look at the stuff Jesus did in the gospel record – He's the King – and He's left the Church – you and me – as His viceroy or regent here below to act in His behalf until He returns. All the stuff He did in the gospels, we're supposed to be doing even now. Just let that sink in a minute. You and I are His personal representatives here on earth because of our being a part of His body, the Church! What a beautiful thing! Friends, some day He's coming back, what glory that will be! We'll see Him face-to-face, on His throne over all things. It'll be the most beautiful day since the Star lit up the heavens and the angels sang! He doesn't care one iota about race, culture, what our social rank is comparative to others. He isn't worried about how much money we have or don't have. He's given all His people the Holy Spirit to live inside them so that our lives overflow with the fruit of the Spirit – you know those from Galatians 5:22-23 – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those should be on display in our lives every hour of the day and night, anytime we're interacting in any way with another human being.

Slim Goodbody and School House Rock

Paul tells us, "Now the body is not made up of one part but of many," in verse 14. And then he goes on to use specific examples of different body parts in the next couple verses – a foot, not being a hand, and thus saying it's not part of the body; an ear, not being an eye, and then saying it's not part of the body. As I read this over the course of the week, I had to chuckle, because the first thing I thought of when he starts listing the various body parts and their conversations was a few things I saw on television as a

little kid. Mainly Slim Goodbody, who sometimes showed up on the Captain Kangaroo show, but also an old School House Rock cartoon about the body. Our young people probably haven't heard of these things, so I'm dating myself!

Paul asks some good questions in there, along the lines of "How would the body function if the whole of it were a singular organ?" In short, it wouldn't do very well. This section is dealing specifically with some people at the church in Corinth who felt their gifts were inferior and unimportant. Apparently, other, more flashy gifts such as speaking in tongues had been glorified in the Corinthian Church, and it made people who didn't have them feel inferior. Just like the human body has to have diversity in its organs to work effectively as a whole, the members of Christ's body, the Church, also have diverse gifts and skills. When we use them together in community, we help to bring about the accomplishment of Christ's purposes, or as we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."

Paul says, "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," (1 Cor. 12:18-20). Paul uses this metaphor of a physical body to prove his point that as followers of Jesus Christ, we follow Jesus best when we follow Him together, in community. Each one of us must properly use our gifts, our skills, and our positions, for the common good – the good of the whole body. Isn't that comforting? He's put you here, He's connected us together here. I read this, and it gives me peace of mind, because I see how many of you are a tight-knit group of people – and that's a great thing, especially when we're all mobilized to be Jesus' hands and feet working together to love on the least and the lost. You help each other out, and that's exactly what He wants us to do.

Diversity Creates Unity

Paul focuses on God's purpose in diversifying the parts of the body, and we can infer that he's saying God's arranged different followers in the body of Christ to exercise different spiritual gifts – not the same gift. The diversity is intended to accomplish God's purpose – to make Himself known to the world, and to show how much He loves it. He loves all the people! God uses diversity to create unity. If we were all exactly the same, carbon-copies of each other, nobody would be here this morning. There would be no point in coming together, because there wouldn't be anything to share.

There is great beauty in diversity. I am a huge Sci-Fi fan. Star Trek, Star Wars, really anything dealing with outer space – I'm into it. I think it's cool. Star Trek, The Original Series, with Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy, and Lt. Uhura, came out in the 1960's. When you watch it, you find out pretty quickly that Mr. Spock is not a human. He's Vulcan. He has pointy ears, and according to Dr. McCoy, green blood. He never cracks a smile, or tells jokes. He's almost robotic in his lack of emotion. And yet,

the symbol for his people is called the IDIC¹. It's a circle with a triangle overlay that reminds me of a wacky capital letter Q – and which represents the Vulcan concept of Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations. Sometimes, even in secular things, like Sci-Fi movies, television shows, and songs, you're able to find seeds of truth which point towards Jesus Christ! Through the unique gifts and skills God has given to each of us individually within the Church, when they are used collectively, it has the potential to be infinite diversity in infinite combinations! He can, and will, do great and mighty things through us, if we let Him, to bring glory to Himself and draw more people to His justifying and sanctifying grace!

In verses 21 and 22, Paul talks about the eye telling the hand, and the head telling the feet, "I don't need you." The idea Paul's driving home to the Corinthians then, and us now, is that we are interdependent. We are mutually dependent on each other as we do the work God's entrusted to us. The chunk of text from verse 21 to 26 is for mainly those who feel like their gifts are superior to others' gifts, and are more important. I've been around a few churches – different denominations – before Kendra and I settled here at New Hope roughly fifteen or sixteen years ago. I'll tell you, we've got brothers and sisters out there, who really emphasize one particular spiritual gift, with little to no regard to the others. I was told once, it's been about seventeen or eighteen years ago now, that I wasn't saved, because I couldn't speak in tongues. That's one gift, and if you don't have a translator, it's useless!

Lots Involved Behind the Scenes

Paul straightens that mindset out here in the next couple verses. He says, "Those parts of the body that seem weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment" (1 Cor. 12:22-24). In other words, people in the Church who seem to have less important functions are most important, and we should show respect, and support for people who are using their gifts and skills in service to the Church. I'm not talking about me, here. There are a lot of other people who do things behind the scenes here at New Hope to make sure we're able to come together to worship on a weekly basis. Janice being one. She does a lot around here. Church treasurer and secretary, board secretary, worship designer, technological guru. She wears a lot of hats!

The trustees – Matt, Jerry, Chris, Jeanette, Bruce before the leukemia kicked in, Keith, right up to just a short time before he went home to Jesus – these guys and gals do a lot around here, they keep things in working condition so we can keep on keeping on, so to speak. We've got worship leaders, people who step up to help with sermon on the steps, and kids programming – Melissa, Joetta, Cindy, Ashley – what they do is appreciated and it's essential. There are a lot of you who help out with VBS, and are

1 Picture link located at: <https://www.entertainmentearth.com/product/star-trek-vulcan-idic-prop-replica/rbrls003>

on various committees of the church – Nominations, Staff-Parish Relations; the list goes on and on! And you all do a fine job. You're doing a great job! But, I do want to put a sales pitch in here, if you will, and say that if you'd like to do some other things around here, we can certainly use you – you just have to speak up! I'd love to see you put your skills and gifts to work for His glory, and help fill needs we have here in community with our brothers and sisters at New Hope!

You Are The Body

I'm going to wrap things up pretty quick here, and touch on the last few verses we've looked at today. Paul tells us, "God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other," in verses 24 and 25. That's really the gist of the whole chapter – that we have concern for those we perceive as the "least," rather than treating those we perceive as "greater" with more respect or with various special privileges. In the Church, in general, and here at New Hope specifically, if one member suffers, it impacts all of us. If one of us gets sick, the rest of us know about it – and we pray for health and wholeness, don't we? Paul goes on, in verse 27, "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." This is, of course, addressed to the local church at Corinth, and I'd like to think it's addressed to us here today, too. Each local church is the body of Christ, just as the Church, in general, is Christ's body. The local church operates and moves within the context of the community where it's geographically located, just like the universal Church operates and moves throughout the whole world.

Paul closes out our passage this morning by mentioning some positions in the ancient church – apostles, prophets, teachers, workers of miracles, those having gifts of healing, of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. It's a different list than what we looked at last week, as gifts God has given to all people. Paul notes three of the gifted individuals, and five of the spiritual gifts from last week. The apostles and prophets were part of the foundation of the Church, and teaching was associated with pastoral duties.

So at least one of these, as I understand it, has fallen vacant in today's Church, and that's the position of the apostle. Apostles were chosen by Jesus during His earthly ministry to be with Him and to go out and preach. We still have people who go out and preach. But the original apostles, Biblically speaking, were also eye-witnesses to His resurrection. Paul asks rhetorical questions, which we'd probably rephrase today to something like, "So, you think you're a big-shot?" The last thing he says is to "Eagerly desire the greater gifts," but this line could also be translated, "But you are eagerly desiring the greater gifts." If we use the alternate translation, then the Corinthians weren't so different from some people in the Church, in general, today. They were apparently seeking status through the exercise of the gifts that seemed to them to be most important. It's important to stay humble, friends, because that's how

we make ourselves, and the Savior we follow and serve, look more winsome to a world in desperate need of His grace!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, move us, by Your Spirit, as hearers to become doers. Let each of us fulfill the ministry to which You have called us, because each of us has received a gift, and is a part of Your body. Call us to recognize each gift and to minister to the varied gifts of each person, even as we stand in awe of such trust and responsibility. In Jesus' name, Amen.