



Three-Week Sermon Series

BEYOND OURSELVES

JANUARY 23, 2022 | BEYOND OURSELVES

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1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-31

Last week, we talked about spiritual gifts, reflecting on what Paul wrote about them to some quarrelling and confused Christians in Corinth. His message was one of equality and necessity: every Christian has been gifted by the Spirit, in a unique way, and those gifts are absolutely necessary to the flourishing and up-building of the Body of Christ and for the common good.

This week, we're going to dig deeper and explore the "so what" of our spiritual gifts: what we're meant to do with them, and what it means to be part of this spiritually-gifted Church, which Paul calls the Body of Christ.

I thought I'd begin today by telling you about someone who did his best to always listen to the call of Christ in his life, and live into the potential of his spiritual gifts. Some of you may have heard of him already: Albert Schweitzer.

Schweitzer was born in 1875, and was a devoted Christian all his life. The first part of his life saw him called to exercise his gifts as a musician and writer by working within and directly for the church. Schweitzer was a gifted musician and scholar of music, with a particular interest in Bach's chorales for the organ. He was a deacon in the Lutheran church – a role that is a career, rather like our diaconal ministers were in the Presbyterian church, with a special focus on pastoral care and helping others. He also wrote two incredibly influential books on Christian theology, that are still being talked about and taught today.

His call must have seemed clear and settled to him: a life as a musician and scholar, deacon and theologian. And then, at age 30, his spiritual gifts and his sense of Christ's calling him to use them led him to answer a call to work as a doctor, under the auspices of a French mission group – who were not terribly impressed with him, since he turned up wanting the job without any medical training.

So Mr. Schweitzer became Dr. Schweitzer, going to medical school, becoming a doctor and moving to Africa, where he settled in to provide medical care to those who needed it. He kept writing about his faith and playing music and caring and helping throughout his life, even as it took him back and forth between Africa and Europe, from the freedom of his medical practice to his beloved organ to internment during the war.

Schweitzer was very much a man of his era in his ways of speaking about and understanding the world and other people; but he always sought to use his spiritual gifts as he was called by God to do, whether in the church or for the church in the world.

And using one's gifts, in and for the church: that is just what the church at Corinth was mostly failing to do.

Last week, we learned that the Christian community in Corinth was deeply fragmented, broken by in-fighting among those with power, poor treatment of the "less important" members, failing to build up the faith of one another or witness to the Good News and act for the common good.

I spoke in fairly broad strokes last week about the divisions and quarrelling at Corinth, leaving out the details other than the argument about spiritual gifts. So here's the whole story, as best we know it.

Sometime before the writing of this letter, Paul had already replied to them about an issue causing conflict. Paul then had a verbal report, and shortly after another letter, revealing that the Corinthian church had pretty thoroughly misunderstood him and were in fact struggling with a much wider variety of issues within their community of believers. There was confusion about things like marriage and divorce and sexual relations within families, social snobbery, participation in "pagan" rituals and celebrations, worship and the Lord's Supper...the church at Corinth was rife with competing ideas and interpretations, and the loudest voices, it seems, were frequently the most wrong-headed.

So Paul wrote again.

We can imagine that the Corinthian church expected to be told who had it right and who had it wrong. But according to Paul, getting it right or wrong as each question arose was not the primary problem.

Of course a community of human beings, even – perhaps especially – a community of Christians, with our strong convictions and deep desire to honour God – of course they're going to get it wrong sometimes, or have different ideas or concerns about their beliefs and how to live them together. Of course there's going to be disagreement.

The real problem was how those disagreements and differences were dealt with – and that is where Paul levels some criticism at the whole community: the fault was putting one's own concerns and ideas – putting oneself – ahead of all, ahead of the common good of the whole group. Note that I did not say self ahead of others, and neither did Paul.

Over the course of the letter, Paul identifies an arrogance that just does not line up with the truth that everything – from saving hope to faith to the church and its spiritual gifts – it's all freely given by God, including Christ. He also points to a self-centered insistence among factions and individuals within the church on their own rights being given priority, at the expense of the rights of those among them without the same voice.

At heart, it seems, the church at Corinth was more about personal power and advancement than it was about advancing the gospel. All of which boils down to an attitude of self before others, which is a divisive view of a community; instead of nurturing the growth and flourishing of the all – of their church as a whole.

So they were a very divided church; to use Paul's church as a body metaphor, they were a poorly-functioning body where an eye might well say to a hand, "I have no need of you," and the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

Paul's Body metaphor – his use of this image of a church and the Church as a body of many parts, held together in Christ – it was really clever. I mean, whether he imagined we'd be reading it 2000 years later or not, it's an image that has aged well and remained understandable, for the most part. It's certainly captured the Christian imagination, and taken hold in the Church as a way of thinking about ourselves. So let's unpack it a bit, and try to get a sense of what the Corinthians would have taken from it, and what we ourselves might find challenging and inspiring about it today.

The first thing to know is that Paul was almost certainly re-purposing – or perhaps redeeming – an image for human community that was already in use at the time. It comes from an old story, one of Aesop's fables, which were first written down about five hundred years before Paul wrote to Corinth and were widely read even back then.

Let me read Aesop's story to you:

In former days, our limbs did not work together as amicably as they do now, but each had a will and way of its own. One time the bodily members began to find fault with the belly for spending an idle, luxurious life, while they were wholly occupied in labouring for its support and ministering to its wants and pleasures.

So the members entered into a conspiracy to cut off the belly's supplies for the future. The hands were no longer to carry food to the mouth, nor the mouth to receive the food, nor the teeth to chew it.

They had not long persisted in this course of starving the belly into subjection, before they all began, one by one, to fail and flag, and the whole body to pine away.

Then the members were convinced that the belly, cumbersome and useless as it seemed, had an important function of its own. They decided that they could no more do without it than it could do without them, and that if they would have the body in a healthy state, they must work together, each in its proper sphere, for the common good of all.

Now to our modern ears, that is a good teaching story about how people need to work together for everyone to flourish and be well. But by the time of Paul, it had long since been picked up by the Roman empire's political spin doctors and used to instead justify the need for a ruling class with a workforce – enslaved or free – below them: yes, it may look like your politicians and wealthy rulers simply exist to sit there and gobble up the outcome of your hard work, but like the belly in the fable, you workers and slaves, you need them for your own benefit.

Paul was well-educated in the Greek and Roman and Jewish traditions; it is very likely he was well aware of the political baggage attached to this human community as a body metaphor. Redeeming that metaphor, transforming it from an abusive body politic into the spiritual body of Christ – there's a powerful, almost revolutionary statement being made here that we just don't hear today at first listen. In taking this approach, Paul raised a key question for this church community that was struggling to let the values and beliefs of the secular world go: in what sense is a body one?

He offers an answer that reveals that the body they form in Christ is very different than that of the solely human communities through which they had understood their lives and themselves before. The human body politic that these Corinthian Christians were used to was “one,” was united, as a hierarchical organism, where the head is the most important part, the sole authority, which all the other parts must obey and sustain, parts which are themselves more or less honourable, inferior or superior to one another. It’s a unity where some parts have all the power, all the voice and all the benefits, and other parts don’t.

Or, Paul proposes, is it possible for a body to be one, united in purpose and in what powers it, yet diverse in form and function across its parts, existing as one in terms of mutual support and vital connection among all its parts, including the head. Every part equally valued, every part equally needed; that’s the revolutionary statement about Christ-infused community that Paul made, and continues to make, as we read and try to understand his words anew for our time.

And all of it sounds good as an idea about how we, the Body of Christ, exists differently than ordinary human community. Putting it into practice and actually living it is trickier, in Corinth and for us today.

We know that individualism has taken hold within our society, where our own personal concerns and goals are more important than everyone and everything else; we have had this demonstrated for us very clearly during the pandemic, with the back-and-forth anti- and pro-masking and vaccinations. It’s a me first society we live in, and I think, in its own way, Corinth must have been like that, too.

As individual people, we are or want to be members of the one Body. But as individuals, we each have our own needs, beliefs, resources, burdens, emphases and histories, and so does the Body of Christ, especially when we think in terms of local churches. Navigating that intersection of being individuals who are members of the Body of Christ – that’s the foundation of being the Body of Christ together and its greatest challenge to us.

For us today, there is tremendous pushback from our culture and our society which tell us our emphasis needs to be on our personal goals and our personal well-being.

This is where we line up with what the Christians in Corinth were struggling with – not in the details of each problem, but in what’s causing all of their division. At heart it really does all come down to everyone putting themselves and what’s good for them ahead of the common good, the good for all.

There is not a lot of good news for the Corinthians in this part of the letter; Paul is hitting them with a lot of tough love at this point to try and shake them out of their old, bad ways of thinking about human community, without giving them any obvious actionable steps to take to get there yet. But there is some good news.

In amongst his re-working of these ideas of body and community, Paul wrote that, 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. You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

So it is with Christ; you all, together, are the body of Christ.

Not you are like the body of Christ – you are the Body of Christ.

Paul reminded them of their baptisms, and if you remember from a couple of weeks ago, among the many amazing outcomes of being baptised, we enter into these new relationships in which we belong to God, are made part of Christ, and are bound to one another, too, as sisters and brothers in him.

No part of Christ’s body is unnecessary to its flourishing, whether we think of the Body as the global, universal church, or our own St. Andrew’s. Scale is not the point; the point is that each part of the body, each individual member, every person who is called and gifted with faith, hope and love, is a necessary part for the flourishing and well-being and work of the Body of Christ...and no part of the Body can truly flourish if it goes off on its own.

Paul manages to empower and value the individual, while still throwing all of his pastoral weight behind the truth that no one truly flourishes away from Christ’s Body, and the Body of Christ is less without each individual part. Just as God created each of our physical bodies to work in unity through all our diverse parts for the same life-giving purpose, so too in Christ are we created again as the Church, his own Body in the world.

And that takes us back around to our own particular concern about the “so what” of spiritual gifts and what we’re meant to do with them. I encouraged you all last Sunday to take a moment this week to check on your spiritual gifts or imagine those gifts might be. It’s kind of getting the wrong end of the stick to think that putting in the time and effort to identify and cultivate your spiritual gifts means that you’ll be expected to do stuff you have neither the time nor the inclination to do. Our spiritual gifts are manifestations of the Spirit, meant to equip us to reveal Jesus to the world, and in doing so, build up the Body of Christ – which we are – for the common good. Our own human flourishing comes about through that same Body, too.

We may well have work or hobbies or talents that meet our needs, or through which we experience a fulfilling sense of success. But that feeling is a shadow compared to the depth of meaning and purpose we’ll find when we recognise and understand our gifts and our use of them as rooted in God. Imagine that a musician had a very hardworking and skilled left hand that did its work and did it well and found satisfaction in that, but never heard the sound of the instrument it was helping to play, never mind the symphony of which it was only one small yet absolutely vital part...if it did its work, day after day, without ever sharing in the unified purpose and power, the intention infusing and driving the body it was attached to.

Nor are our spiritual gifts to be used only within the four walls of a particular church building. A spiritual gift of compassion might see us visiting another church member in hospital or calling them on the phone, and compassion might also see us volunteering at a community organisation that supports the vulnerable; a spiritual gift of hospitality might be used in helping out during coffee hour after church, building up the body through offering the means for fellowship, and then used again to welcome people into your home, offering food and friendship and Christ present for your guests.

It’s the same gift in your life, the same God who gave it by the same Spirit, for the same purpose; and where you are, there can be a member, a limb, of that Body, if we use our spiritual gifts in a Christ-like way for the good of all and to build up the faith of all in Jesus.

I was telling you about Albert Schweitzer, so I thought I’d share a few lines from one of his books, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*: “[Christ] comes to us as one unknown without a name, as of old by the lakeside he came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word, follow me, and sets us to

the task which he has to fulfil for our time. He commands, and to those who obey, he will reveal himself in the work, the conflict, and the suffering which they shall pass through in his fellowship.”

This really is the heart of what it means to answer that call and live into the potential that the Spirit plants within us as it gifts us; following Jesus, using our spiritual gifts wherever we are, in whatever fields of work and mission and church life that we are called to. We know about Albert Schweitzer because the world caught him doing it and gave him a Nobel Peace Prize for it, but what he was doing – living the gospel for the common good, to build up the faith we all share – that’s work we are all called to, as the Body of Christ: as churches and as individuals who are sent out from the church.

Next Sunday is the last part of our mini-series on spiritual gifts and carrying on with Paul’s body metaphor, we’ll be looking at what we could think of as the circulatory system that keeps us connected and energised as we seek to flourish and grow together in the Body of Christ.

But for now, your challenge for the week ahead is to practice reminding yourself that you are – or could be – a part of the Body of Christ wherever you are, experiencing and revealing all its meaning and saving power and potential. Thanks be to God! Amen.