

The Church That Loves
I Corinthians 12:4-26
The Reverend Anne Benefield
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Introduction: In our passage today, Paul discusses “charismata,” a word invented by Paul for gifts that are given by God’s grace. In the first part of the passage, Paul explained that there is a rich variety of different gifts but that all are given by the Spirit.

In the continuation of the passage which I am going to read, Paul uses a Roman political metaphor, but completely changes its meaning. The one body image was used by Roman’s to urge members of the lower societal classes to “stay in your place.” Paul uses the image to explain the equality of the members of the body. Paul also explains that the body to which we belong is the body of Christ. “Member” means a functioning organ in a living body, not “membership” as in a club or association.

I Corinthians 12:4-11 and 12-26

⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

¹²For 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. ¹³For 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.

¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If 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. ¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The 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.” ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and 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; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Prayer: Lord God, bless us with a deep and abiding sense that we are Christ's body in the world. Amen.

This passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians is remarkable. People come up with powerful analogies all the time, but usually the image is tied directly to the current culture. Paul's image of the body and the different parts still speaks to us, 2,000 years later. Paul's message is perfectly clear: each of us is an indispensable part of the body of Christ, the church. The body of Christ is the church that loves each person as Christ does. The body of Christ is the church that loves the whole church the bride of Christ. And the body of Christ loves the whole world that God created.

It's easy for us to discount different members of the church. Paul wrote to the Corinthians because there was a problem...because each person was not being treasured. Some persons in the church had more importance. Some persons in the church were considered less important and given less dignity. As it was with the Corinthians, it is with us.

In *The Word and Power Church*, Doug Banister tells one of my favorite stories about World War II:

The spring of 1940 found Hitler's panzer divisions mopping up French troops and preparing for the siege of Great Britain. The Dutch had already surrendered, as had the Belgians. The British army foundered on the coast of France in the channel port of Dunkirk. Nearly a quarter million young British soldiers and over 100,000 allied troops faced capture or death.

The Fuehrer's troops, only a few miles away in the hills of France, closed in on an easy kill. The Royal Navy had enough ships to save barely 17,000 men, and the House of Commons was told to brace itself for "hard and heavy tidings."

Then while a despairing world watched with fading hope, a bizarre fleet of ships appeared on the horizon of the English Channel. Trawlers, tugs, fishing sloops, lifeboats, sailboats, pleasure craft, an island ferry named Gracie Fields, and even the America's Cup challenger Endeavor, all manned by civilian sailors, sped to the rescue. The ragtag armada eventually rescued 338,682 men and returned them home to the shores of England, as pilots of the Royal Air Force jockeyed with the German Luftwaffe in the skies above the channel. It was one of the most remarkable naval operations in history.

The church is God's ragtag armada. The church is a mix of flawed individuals on a rescue operation commissioned by God. [Doug Banister, *The Word and Power Church*, (Zondervan, 1999), pp. 33-34.]

We are the body of Christ and like Christ we go out into the world. The stories of when we cooperate inspire us, just as the stories about when we belittle each other should make us shutter. This has been a tragic week in America. We have such deep divides in our country. We

have to find a way to love each other across social differences, race divisions, and religious traditions. In Christ there is no East or West...

I don't know if you realize this, but prejudice is contagious and acceptance is catching, too. In focus groups where a planted person spoken disparagingly about another race, others expressed the same prejudice. In focus groups where a planted person spoke in appreciation and respect of different races, the others expressed positive beliefs.

The true church loves each and every member and friend as a member in the body of Christ.

I heard a story about a time when General William Westmoreland was reviewing a platoon of paratroopers in Vietnam. As he went down the line, he asked each of them a question: "How do you like jumping, son?"

"Love it, sir!" was the first answer.

"How do you like jumping?" he asked the next.

"The greatest experience in my life, sir!" exclaimed the paratrooper.

"How do you like jumping?" he asked the third.

"I hate it, sir," he replied.

"Then why do you do it?" asked Westmoreland.

"Because I want to be around guys who love to jump." [Harvey MacKay, *Swim with the Sharks*]

If you love our Savior, you want to be around others who love our Savior. It's just that simple. Together in all our ragtag glory we are the body of Christ. We are the church that loves everyone who walks in the door, as well as those who never walk in, but whose care is in us as the body of Christ.

Fred Craddock shared another one of my favorite stories. He says,

Before I married and served in the little mission in the Appalachians, I moved down to a place on Watts Bar Lake, between Chattanooga and Knoxville, a little village. It was the custom in that church at Easter to have a baptismal service. My Church immerses, and it was held, this baptismal service, in the Watts Bar Lake on Easter evening at sundown. Now out on the sandbar, I, with the candidates for baptism, moved into the water, and then they moved across to the shore where the little congregation was gathered, singing around a fire and cooking supper. They had constructed little booths with hanging blankets for changing clothes. As the candidates moved from the water, they went up and

changed clothes and went to the first in the center. Finally, last of all, I went over, changed clothes, and went to the fire.

Once we were all around the fire, this was the ritual of that tradition. Glenn Hickey, always Glenn, introduced the new people, gave their names, where they lived, and their work. Then the rest of us formed a circle around them, while they stayed warm at the fire. The ritual was that each person in the circle then gave her or his names, and said this, "My name is...and if you ever need somebody to do washing and ironing..." "My name is ... If you ever need anybody to chop wood..." "My name is...If you ever need anybody to baby-sit..." "My name is ... If you ever need anybody to sit with the sick..." "My name is..., and if you ever need a car to go to town..." and around the circle.

Then we ate, and we had a square dance. And then at a time they knew, I didn't know, Percy Miller, with thumbs in his bibbed overalls, would stand up and say, "Time to go," and everybody left. He lingered behind and, with his big shoe, kicked sand over the dying fire. And my first experience of that, he saw me standing there still, and he looked at me and said, "Craddock, folks don't ever get any closer than this."

I that little community, they have a name for that. I've heard it in other communities, too. In that community, their name for that is "church." They call that "church."

That church, like our church, loves. Amen.