

Sermon on Spiritual Gifts – 1. Cor.12:12-31a: One Body, Many Parts

(Regula A. Brandle, St. Paul's, Edmonton, Jan.24/2010)

Prayer.

I don't know about you, but everywhere I look these last little while, I cannot, absolutely cannot imagine why we ever think 'individualism' works.

I tell you why....

Individualism didn't bring the help to Haiti as it is needed.

Individualism doesn't support people in need in our midst.

Individualism would tear our church ministries apart.

And on a personal basis...

Individualism doesn't provide my boys with what they need.

And so goes the list...as I am sure you could add countless examples.

And so, today, I have the privilege to talk about one of the most affirming and encouraging passages in Scripture.

It is from 1 Corinthians 12, which just read for us.

Now, I am not going to walk us through this passage verse by verse, or part by part.

But if you like an analogy, we are going to look at it from a bird's eye's perspective when flying over a landscape.

So, to set the stage...the Scripture passage in 1 Corinthians 12 talks about the fact that we need each other and that we differ from each other in how we can help others.

Based on these two facts, we all have somewhat different responsibilities and contributions to make, based not only on different spiritual gifts, but as I may add also, based on different skills, energy levels and circumstances.

Last Sunday, Michael spoke on the passage immediately preceding the one of today.

It was about spiritual gifts and that they are meant for the common good, not as trophies for us to be proud of or hoard for ourselves.

I don't know if you ever think of gifts this way, but spiritual gifts are a responsibility given to each one of us.

Today's passage is building on the foundation of spiritual gifts.

In a way, spiritual gifts, i.e. people with different spiritual gifts and combination of them are like different building blocks.

Today's passage answers the question: What is supposed to happen to the people with different spiritual gifts?

And the answer is: They are meant to work together, in harmony, without pride and selfish interests, and thus it builds the kingdom of God and everyone benefits. Anything else is a distortion of God's good plans and intentions for the world he created and for the church he instituted.

I am sure it is nothing new that I am sharing here.

Well, how could it be any different, when every living person on earth was created in the image of God, the community of God Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

God himself operates in working together in harmony and unity and with different contributions.

So, it is absolutely natural that we have the same drive.

And, to be honest, if I look at our church community, I see the principle at work over and over again. And I am absolutely certain it puts a big smile on god's face. I mean it!

So, I would like to share a few examples that have come to my attention over the last little while. One example is not really about the Body of Christ, but as I said, the idea is not exclusive to Christians taking 1 Corinthians 12 seriously.

1. At the church office we have tried to reduce the amounts of natural resources in our office work.
In our initial efforts we weren't very successful but we continue to work at better ways of communication and yet use less paper.
However, none of us in the office would consider this task as one of our primary interests or skills, but it so happened that we found out about a parishioner who has a university degree in communication and marketing and is helping us with this responsibility. This is the body of Christ at work!
2. In our Children's Ministry Leadership Team, there is Tanya Dundass who is just such a trooper in getting projects done; there is Nancy Craig who has a strong desire to reach kids outside our church community with the love and truth of God; there is Margot Byer who is terrific at teaching our toddler class; there is Rosalie Freund-Heritage who is musically gifted and enjoys promoting worship for kids; there is Alex Jakeway, whose heart is in making Jesus real to kids and invite them to commit to Him, but she can't do as much as she would like, because of her three young children; there is Laurel Parker who has a nursery-aged child and offered to oversee the operations of the nursery; there is Christine Stobart who has and is making such a difference to our older Sunday school class kids; and there is me who enjoys facilitating our team and to look at the big picture. We are all rather different, and have different energy levels and different amounts of availability, but together our Children's Ministry is served well.
3. In our Wholeness Prayer Ministry we have people who are all gifted in hearing God's voice and who have a burden to make a difference through intercessory prayer. It appears as if we were all kind of the same regarding spiritual gifts....but the truth is that some of us really prefer just having the opportunity to engage in listening prayer. But others also do well facilitating a prayer ministry appointment and guide the team and the person prayed for through their time with the Lord.

Everyone provides a unique contribution to the team, and so I believe very strongly, the Lord can accomplish what he intends to.

4. And then there is the example of Wendy Goetze's cancer. Some people have started to provide meals for the family, some are driving the kids to activities, some are doing the groceries for them, some have given money for parking at the Cross Cancer Institute, some are praying for them or with them, some have given them helpful information, some have encouraged the family through care notes.

This too is about a wonderful example of the body of Christ at work, and though spiritual gifts are part of it, it is also just very much about caring in practical ways and helping in how personal circumstances allow it.

5. Haiti's earthquake. As soon as it happened, many countries started mobilizing their resources. They sent and are sending medical people, army soldiers, firefighters, rescue workers, and so on. But I also remember hearing on the news that different countries took on different key tasks.

And again, since I mentioned it at the beginning....

6. As a parent, I fully affirm that it takes a 'village' to raise my kids. I can't do it all by myself, even if I wanted.

But others have come alongside me in caring for the boys, playing with them, babysitting for me, assessing their developmental needs, giving me toys, books, clothes, etc, connecting me with helpful agencies. Again, for me it is an example of 'the body of Christ' at work.

There are countless more examples within and outside our church community, but I don't have the time to list them all.

But it is very encouraging to know and experience that yes, the body of Christ works, more often than not.

And yes, we also see a lot of 'the body of Christ at work' outside the church.

Hence the example from the Haiti earthquake.

But this should not surprise us, as all people have been created for community and in order to look out for one another.

But having said this:

What then is the difference between Christ followers' efforts and those who do not follow Jesus, if there is any difference at all?

Any suggestions, from our passage?

- the emphasis on surrendering selfish interests
- the emphasis on relinquishing personal pride

That's why we sometimes also hear how the working together falls apart or is stifled or is not caring towards everyone involved.

That's why we hear reports of some problems in the rescue efforts in Haiti.

The invitation from God to each one of us is to work on our pride issues and on selfish interests – to lay them aside.

That is a high calling, but that's where I believe the growing edge is for most if not all of us.

Needless to say that I struggle with it and I have seen pride and selfish interests creeping up within the church community too.

We have been trained by society to do how we please and how we think it is right, and yet, the Lord calls us to mutual submission, to working together and be content when we don't stand out in any particular situation.

If we are to be salt in the world.....the world will indeed notice if they see how we work in harmony and unity and without selfish interests.

This of course is in the worldwide church and in the church here at St. Paul's.

Not that I can talk extensively about how to conquer pride and selfish interests, but today's first reading from Psalm 139 gives us some guidance.

If you and I know how much God loves us and how uniquely he has created each one of us;

how much He cares about us and has a special unique place for each one of us in his heart and kingdom;

we will be so much better able to contribute to the whole than to stumble over personal pride and selfishness, not to mention feelings of inadequacy and fear.

Then, the picture which was shared last week during listening time can become fully and really true:

Each snowflake is unique, but when you stand back it is just one big white cover over the landscape.

At the end, what matters is not so much what everyone contributed in their uniqueness, but that the mission of God was fulfilled. That's what we need to delight in.

You stand back and you don't see individuals anymore, just the big picture.

This is the essence of the passage in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a.

Amen.