Gifts for the Common Good - 1 Corinthians 12:4-27 - 16 June 2019

We have the Apostle Paul to thank for the image of the Body of Christ. In this particular passage, he was addressing the quarrelling followers of Jesus in Corinth. Paul had established this Christian community only a few years earlier, and he was writing because he had heard they couldn't agree on leadership. So, they were arguing amongst themselves. Paul is trying to tell them in this letter-you're missing the point. Spend your energy on what Jesus taught us. Respect the gifts in each other. And it doesn't matter what race or class or ethnic background you are, we are all equal in the eyes of the one God. We are all imperfect but we are all valuable people.

There's a lot of talk in our country lately about values. The political landscape is bringing to the forefront all the "issues" that have been used to divide us. Australians have been no different than the church goers in Corinth-arguing about leadership.

Yet, no church is more a mess than the church Paul writes to in Corinth. If you ever feel bad about the church, just read 1 Corinthians; you’ll feel much better! Paul’s first letter, what we call 1 Corinthians, was full of advice on how to get back on track as a church. His second letter, what we call 2 Corinthians, showed that they had listened to him and made some much-needed changes.

In chapters 12-14 of 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses spiritual gifts, these unique ways the Holy Spirit shows up in the lives of believers. As you read these chapters, you catch a general theme of unity out of diversity. The Holy Spirit immerses each person into the church as they become a believer (this is a spiritual experience, not baptism with water), and that same Holy Spirit uniquely gifts each one to do ministry for the good of the body. So, when you get a bunch of believers together in a church, you’ve got a beautiful blend of unique individuals to care for each other and reach their community with the love of Christ. That is God’s design for the church. And as messed up as the church is, it is still God’s plan for reaching a hurting world.

We all know that there are different styles of leadership. Some are autocratic, some are leis se faire, some lead from behind and some are ineffective. Different styles of leadership are needed at different times in a community. That is one of the reasons Ministers in the Uniting Church move from one placement to another. Ministries have seasons and leadership needs to change with the seasons.

In the Uniting Church there are also various kinds of Ministers. A person can train to be a Deacon who works at the intersection of the church and the world. You can train to be a Pastor who focusses on caring for people. You can be a Lay Preacher like Meredith and Marion, who are not ordained but are trained to preach and lead congregations. You can also be trained to be a Minister of the Word. That training means you are taught to care for a congregation in all sorts of ways, including preaching, pastoral care and leading.

Ministers of the Word often do extra training along the way, as they encounter different situations and want to ‘up skill’.

Some Ministers have extra training in the dynamics of small groups; some might have training in disaster recovery; some in intergenerational worship; I have recently done some training in “Trauma Informed Pastoral Care”. There are also a good number of Ministers who are trained to do the work of Intentional Interim Ministry in congregations where there is an identified need for short term ministry around a specific need. They can be employed by the Presbytery when a much loved, long term minister leaves a congregation, or if there has been a difficult situation in the church and focussed leadership is required.

But ministers are not the only ones gifted by the Holy Spirit. What is important to know about the gifts the Holy Spirit is that they are given to all people in the church. The key phrase in Paul's letter is: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." To each, for the common good. There it is, right there in the Bible. God's Holy Spirit gives each one of us a unique gift for the good of all of God's people and all of creation. So, a congregation should not expect the Minister to do everything. That is not Biblical. It is a team effort. A minister doesn’t have all of the gifts, the congregation as a whole has the gifts needed for the ministries God is calling the congregation to be involved in. it is a collaboration.

The problem Paul found with the Corinthian church was, lots of folks were arguing about who had the best spiritual gift, and some were thinking they didn’t have any gifts at all! So today’s three points are selective; they may not ALL apply to you. But one of them might. Consider these three attitudes and see if you find yourself in any of them. First, the attitude...

1. “I can’t do anything!” (vv. 15-20)

This is the person who feels inferior, who thinks, “I have nothing to offer. My church doesn’t need me. I can’t sing. I can’t preach. I’m not good at anything.”

First, you are not inferior. As the old saying goes: “God doesn’t make junk.” Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” The word for “handiwork” is sometimes translated “masterpiece.” You are a masterpiece on the canvas of God’s creation. And you were “created in Christ Jesus to do good works.”

If you say you have nothing to offer, then you’re really saying more about God’s ability than your own. Everybody has something to offer the body of Christ.

And that brings us to Paul’s favourite metaphor for the church: the “body of Christ.” He uses the word “body” 18 times in today’s text and draws on this picture more than any other in his writings.

Back to the first attitude, “I can’t do anything.” Sometimes we’re jealous of people who have gifts we don’t have. “Why can’t I be more like them?” Drawing on the image of a human body, Paul writes in verses 15-17, “Now if the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being 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 stop being part of the body. 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?”

Every part of the body is important. The foot is important, even though it’s not a hand. The ear is important even though it’s not an eye. The body needs every unique body part! Not everyone needs to be a minister, but somebody does. Not everyone needs to play the piano, but somebody does. Not everyone needs to serve on the Church Council, or make hospital visits, or organize functions, or pray for those in need, or write notes of encouragement to people, or visit people in the nursing home, or pass out newsletters. But somebody does. Someone needs to do each of those things. And each of you are equipped to glorify God and the church in some unique way. You will know you’re using your gift well when God blesses it. That’s a sign that you are honouring God with your unique gifting. It may not always be easy using your gifts but it will always bring glory to God.

Maybe you’re thinking, “I don’t like my gifting. I want to do something else!” Take it up with God, because verse 18 says, “But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.”

You are important to the body of Christ. Find what God blesses and keep doing it.

Maybe the second statement is yours. Have you ever found yourself thinking...?

2. “I have to do everything!” (vv. 21-25)

In verses 21-25 Paul wrote to people who thought their gift was better than everyone else’s. So let’s correct that right now: You and I are not God’s last hope for humanity, even for Kiama or Jamberoo! This church could survive quite well without any one of us. No one is indispensable.

In verse 21, 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!’” He goes on to talk about how some of the most hidden parts of the body are absolutely indispensable. Think of your liver or kidneys. Quite hidden, but very important!

Sometimes I hear about someone who has been quietly praying for a person or for a situation coming up. Henry Blackaby calls these faithful prayer warriors the “knees” in the body of Christ, because they’re at least figuratively kneeling in prayer. But don’t worry if you can’t kneel; you can still pray. Sometimes I hear about someone visiting a person who is hurting, or offering food, or encouraging the person who just lost their spouse to come out for dessert or a coffee. These little things that would often go unnoticed are no less important than the most stirring sermon, or the most incredible solo. None of us can do it all. We need everyone to be at work in the way God has called them. Otherwise, the body is incomplete. And there are lots of churches with missing body parts because people who are gifted are unwilling to use their gifts to build up the body.

So those are the first two myths when it comes to being church. “I can’t do anything,” or “I have to do everything.” And the last one we’ll look at today is,

3. “I don’t need anybody else.” (vv. 25-26)

Every person counts in the body of Christ. And the truth is, we do need each other. You are given at least one gift when the Holy Spirit brings you into the family of God. You may have lots of gifts, but you don’t have all the gifts. You need others in the body to be complete. There are no “Lone Ranger Christians.”

Paul writes for the need for unity out of our diversity. Listen to verse 25. Why has God given greater honour 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.” God wants us to care about each other. That’s what being the church is all about!

We are interconnected. Verse 26: “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.” Elsewhere, Paul writes, “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15). Our lives are caught up in each other. You know how, when you have a broken nail, it annoys you all day, you become distracted by it? Or if you have a migraine, nothing else in your body is going to function well? That’s because the human body is inter-related. And so it is with the church.

It’s ok to admit that you need your brother and sister in Christ. We are not designed to go it alone. It is the Gospel of Jesus Christ that unites us and the gifts of the Spirit that brings diversity. We are not all expected to be involved in the exact same ministries or mission areas. We are all gifted differently but we are all expected to be united in our worship, bringing God honour and praise with our lives.

Let’s close with a hard look at verse 27: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”

In other words, the team comes first. I used to play basketball in my teenage years and everyone was expected to be able to play a part. I was hopeless at shooting goals but I was good at ducking and weaving and losing my opponent so people could pass me the ball. Every team member had a particular strength and we focussed on those strengths to try to win games.

God gives us that blend in verse 27. WE are the body of Christ. We are all in this together. And then we are reminded of our individual giftedness, as he says, “And EACH ONE OF YOU is a part of it.” Use your unique gift and use it well, to honour God, to build up the church, to draw people to Jesus.

Let’s pray about it:

Thank you, God, for this most unlikely of instruments you could use to reach humanity: the local church. Nobody but you could trust the most important message ever to the least likely ones to carry it. We can’t get along with each other, let alone those outside the church. We compare, we get jealous, we grow prideful. And yet, you call us to unity, unity out of diversity. Help us to live out the gifts of the Spirit you put in our life, and to do it to help each other, so this world will see you at work and be drawn to your love. We ask this through the head of the body, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.