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Title: You Are a Part

Date: January 27, 2019

Preaching: Ryan Hazen, Senior Associate Minister

Scripture: [Luke 4:14-21](#)

Text: [1 Corinthians 12:12-31a](#)

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When I was a kid, I was asked the question that we still ask kids today – “what do you want to be when you grow up?” I honestly don’t remember what I actually told people but I do remember what I THOUGHT when asked that question but was too embarrassed to say. For years of my adolescence, I actually wanted to be

two things. I wanted to participate in track meets, specifically running the high hurdles. For you to have a complete picture and to fully understand my embarrassment, you have to know that from third grade on, my physique could best be described as “pudgy.”

My other great ambition was to be able to sing a solo in the church choir or any choir for that matter. When auditioning for the school choir that everyone got into, I didn’t get in. I was convinced that they didn’t know what they were missing but I finally came to terms that I couldn’t run the high hurdles and that I couldn’t sing very well. Even now, I’m very conscious that my microphone is turned off before I open my hymnal but I still want to believe that my singing voice is better than it actually is. I don’t know what happens, it sounds great when I’m alone. Ultimately, however, I know that I’ll never be a track star or even a good singer. We all struggle when we seek to identify our gifts and pair them with what we are passionate about. Usually one of the pieces doesn’t quite fit into the puzzle. Over the intervening years from then to now, I came to realize that there were things I was good at – it was just not those things.

The diversity of gifts among the people in the Corinthian church was the source of division. Paul writes our passage today, and really all of 1 Corinthians, to address those divisions and to call them out on the infighting that was taking place. The Corinthian church was a mess. The people in the church were fighting about which one of them had the more superior of the gifts. This section of Paul's argument is to affirm, against the arrogance and self-centeredness of many of the Corinthians, that all members of the body are needed despite whether the "weaker" members are convinced of their

place and despite what the "stronger" members think. God is the One who has placed all the members in the body and who works with them so that there might be no divisions.

In the first eleven verses of the chapter, Paul has pointed out that diversity comes from God and particularly from the Holy Spirit. There is a diversity of gifts, but they all come from "the same Spirit," Paul says. Not only do they have a common source, but they are intended to accomplish "a common good."

In his book, "A House United – How the Church Can Save the World," author Allen Hilton first compares the American church to the Corinthian church. He suggests – no, he proclaims – that Christian leaders and churches have bought into the definition of our country as blue or red, imaging that righteous political convictions license us to nurse open disdain for half the nation. He gets right to the point when he says that half the nation would say, "the problem is those blasted liberals. They want to dole out our dollars to lazy people, siphon the energy out of our economy with regulations and reduce sexuality to an opinion." The other half of the country would say the problem is the conservatives. "They want to shrink government just small enough to fit in our bedrooms, they don't care about the poor and they don't care about brown-skinned people."¹

Like Paul talking to the Corinthians, Allen Hilton says to the modern day church, "the church is complicit in the polarization and we must consider why we've grown so fond of our habit of division. That complicit church is called to answer that polarization with our own mutually loving alternative."

"A house divided against itself cannot stand," said Abraham Lincoln, speaking about a nation divided over the issue of slavery. He was echoing Jesus, who uttered those words when his enemies accused him of casting out demons by the power of Satan himself. Paul doesn't use those exact words but he is addressing a divided church.

Today the church is divided by a host of major hot-button issues: politics, sexual ethics, social justice, immigration, theology - who will be saved and how, and worship style. In our text for today, the cause of division in the church at Corinth may even seem much less serious than the issues facing the church today, but the way Paul deals with the Corinthian division may show us a way to heal the fractures in the Body of Christ today.

The issue in I Corinthians 12 was the divisions caused by the diversity of spiritual gifts in that local church. It was so ridiculous that those who thought their gifts were better than others were rushing to the Lord's Supper

and eating all of the bread. Just before our reading starts, Paul tells them that if they are hungry they should eat at home. He lists four groups which could not be more different – Jews and Greeks, slave and free. Even now, even this week, our society wanted us to take sides between disparate groups - Native Americans, Black Israelites and Catholic High School students.²

In our reading for today, Paul shifts his argument, focusing on a new image, the human body. Verse 12 is the theme of this whole section. "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body...." This is so self-evident, so experientially obvious, that no one could argue with it. Then Paul drives his point home; "so it is with Christ." Of course, Paul is not talking there about Christ himself; he is referring to the way Christ is made visible in this world. The only body Christ has in this world is the church. "Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is part of it." Everything that follows flows from and is an elaboration of this fundamental, and incredible, theme.

I say "incredible," because it is literally unbelievable that the Incarnate Son of God, the eternal Holy One, should entrust the work of making himself known to a motley crew of mere mortals, and sinful ones at that. What a terrible risk that was and is! How can it be that a squabbling pack of naughty children are the agents of God's love? Well, says Paul over and over, it's all because of grace.

Note how often Paul emphasizes that God's grace is behind this incredible thing called the Body of Christ. He begins in verse 13 by reminding us how we got to be in the Body in the first place. "For we were all baptized by one Spirit.... And we were all given the one Spirit to drink." Now, we could easily get lost in the theology of that sentence but let's focus on Paul's main point. We are in the body because of God's sovereign work by his Spirit. Christ died for sinners and the Spirit created the church out of that group of sinners for whom Christ died. We're in the church, part of the Body of Christ, because of God's grace.³

The church is not a voluntary organization, a creation of human will and intellect, like a corporation or a country club. Yes, of course, there is a very human side to it all; we do choose to join this church or that one or to leave entirely. But ultimately, the church exists and will continue to exist because of the gracious work of God. "On this rock, I will build my church." When we do church in its many forms, we are not playing our own game. We are doing something very holy. The church is God's way of making the invisible Christ known.

Part of the way God reveals Christ is through the diversity of gifts in the Body. The Corinthians wanted to fight over how the gifts were distributed. "I've got a better one than you do." "My gifts don't really count for much." To those with inferiority complexes and to those who were huge egos, Paul says the same thing. It is God who gave you that gift. God "arranged the parts of the body...just as he wanted them to be." God "has combined the members of the body and has given the greater honor...." God "has appointed...." When you fight over gifts, you are fighting over the sovereign grace of God. So stop it and use your gifts for the common good.

Allen Hilton, that author that I spoke about earlier, sees room for hope in our fragmented culture. It's a place called the church if we can get our act together. He says it like this – "Our chances of living out Jesus' prayer 'that they all may be one' would skyrocket if we actually knew one another. Yet, we haven't even met a lot of our brothers and sisters. In fact, we've been avoiding them. Here's the rub with that avoidance strategy:" he says, "statistics and arguments (and I would add Facebook) rarely unseat prejudice. We change our minds about a group when we experience actual people from it, in all their stereotype-defying complexity. Significant transformations or opening of minds usually happen through experience rather than argument." ⁴

God's whole idea in creating the Body of Christ was to show the world what humanity could be and should be through Jesus Christ. He combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no divisions in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Do you think you are not a part of this plan – do you think you are not a part of the body of Christ? Do you think other people will do it? Do you have trouble seeing where you fit into God's plan for a reconciling body called the church? Rest assured, you have a part. Rest assured, you are a puzzle piece that has a place for the picture to be complete.

There once was a bright yellow city maintenance truck that was creeping along a quiet, city street. A worker slowly and methodically climbs out of the cab of the truck and begins digging a large hole between the sidewalk and the street. When she finishes digging the hole, a second worker gets out of the truck and fills the hole in and tamps the dirt back into place. A few yards down the street, the two repeat the same procedure, then again and again.

A woman who lived on the street had been watching all of this from her living room window. Not understanding what they were doing, she decided

to ask. She walks out and asks one of the workers, “what in the world are you doing – digging these holes and filling them up again – I don’t understand.”

One of the workers responds, “we are in the midst of the city’s urban beautification project.”

Dismayed, the woman asks, “what’s so beautiful about all of these holes?”

“Well, you see,” said the worker, “the man who plants the trees is out sick today.”⁵

We all have roles to play, we all have gifts to use for the glory of God, for the body of Christ. When we don’t use them, there are holes.

¹ Hilton, Allen. *A House United: How the Church Can Save the World*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 2018. From Introduction page ix.

² Article by Caitlin Flanagan in *The Atlantic* dated January 23, 2019 titled *The Media Botched the Covington Catholic Story* found at www.theatlantic.com.

³ Commentary on Lectionary Epistle, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a by Stan Mast found at www.cep.calvinseminary.edu.

⁴ Hilton, page 162

⁵ Illustration found in a sermon by King Duncan, *The Pitcher is Not Alone*. www.sermons.com.