

Sermon for Last Epiphany, Year C
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“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” So says St. Paul to the church in Corinth. You see, the members of the church in Corinth were individualists. The trouble there really was about relationships. Because each person was pursuing his or her own desires through the vehicle of supposed Christian worship.

There was an outpouring of miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit in Corinth. And the Corinthians naturally gravitated toward the flashiest gift they could find. In the Ancient world trances, ecstatic speech, and erratic behavior were considered a sign of divine presence. Epilepsy was considered a gift of the gods and held in high regard. So the Corinthian Christians thought that those who spoke in tongues were particularly spiritual. That in itself is simple enough to correct. It’s only a matter of teaching. But many of the Corinthians also desired to have the gift of tongues above all other gifts. Because they wanted to be thought particularly spiritual themselves. Their participation in the church had become all about them.

But if we are all members of the body of Christ, then none of this is about us as individuals at all. It is about Jesus the Christ, and it only becomes our story if we are part of him and part of each other. Of course, there are functions that each of us must fulfill. The body is not complete without all of its members functioning properly. There must be apostles, those who are sent out to spread the Gospel. There must be prophets, those who preach God’s word with authority. There must be teachers of the truth. God has appointed miracle workers and healers and helpers and administrators and those who speak in tongues. And God has given them the gifts to accomplish these tasks.

But the point and purpose of all these gifts is to do the work of Christ and to keep his body healthy. No gift is more honorable than any other, as long as they are all being used in obedience to Christ, who is our head. Can you imagine a body the members of which are not obeying the head? In which the hands start grabbing things at random, and each of the feet starts to go its own way? Such a body would not be one for very long. Soon it would be a disorderly pile of decaying organic material. That doesn’t mean that the members of Christ’s body don’t have any initiative. It simply means that everything needs to be done under his direction and in his will.

So being the body of Christ means using our God-given gifts in obedience to Jesus. But we can also say more about it than that. It also means that we will have a certain kind of relationship to each other. If we are part of Christ and have the Spirit of Christ, then we will share in the kind of life that Christ and his Spirit

and his Father have amongst each other. And that life is characterized most emphatically by love. St. John tells us that God *is* love. And our spiritual maturity is not measured by the gifts God gives us, but by his love in our relationships.

Make no mistake. The devil delights in redefining words and ideas for us, so that we no longer understand what God is telling us. This word, *agape*, love or charity, is one of the most vexed terms in the Bible, because one of the most central. But if we have God in our lives and have his life in us, then I Corinthians 13 is a picture of what that will look like. “Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude.” Unlike the Corinthians, loving people don’t do things to impress others. Nor do they lash out at others from the emptiness inside them. Instead they seek to serve others and build them up, even if that includes correction. “Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.” Love is not focused on fulfilling one’s own desires. Love is directed toward goodness and truth. “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

This kind of relationship amongst its members is *the* very sign of Christ’s body. This is how people will know that we are followers and disciples of Jesus. This is the way to tell if the body is healthy. It is the “more excellent way” that St. Paul is teaching the Corinthians. Ultimately, what does it matter whether any of us got our way, or exercised particular gifts, or even accomplished great things? St. Paul says, “if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”

Ultimately, the only thing we will have left is these relationships with each other. The gifts God gives us for building up his church. The physical material he gives us to sustain life and make it enjoyable. Our accomplishments. Our petty desires. Any part of our identities that is not completely rooted in Christ himself. All of this will be gone, because it is all imperfect. And all that will be left will be Jesus and his church. The real church, not the bricks and mortar, not the positions and committees. Just the bridegroom and his bride. Jesus and us.

But if we have no love, if we focus on the things that are passing away rather than the permanent things, then St. Paul tells us that we are childish. Not able to receive the kingdom like a child. Just childish, pure and simple. Immature. “Grow up,” he says to the Corinthians. Only love never ends. Stop competing with each other for honor and position and your own glory. You *have* no glory of your own. You only live for the glory of God, like Moses, whose face shone with it. Your only identity is in Christ, who shone with his own glory on the mountain. Listen to him, and do what he says. Love one another. Everything else is dust.

Part of being a grownup is knowing that I don't see everything clearly. My own perspective is not necessarily correct. My knowledge is not perfect. We "see in a mirror dimly". But the promise of God is that we will see clearly when the imperfect passes away. When we see him face to face, then everything will be made clear. Even as God understands and knows us now, so will he show us his reality when we are finally there. Until then, we focus on the permanence of the people around us, who will worship in his presence at the end. And we love them as he gives us the strength.