

Epiphany 3 / January 26, 2025

1 Corinthians 12:27

*“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”*

Gifted to serve

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians deals with many issues affecting and dividing the Corinthian Church. People were united through baptism into the body of Christ. People were divided by their boasting of the person who baptized them. Many of the members were Gentiles converted from paganism. They wondered if it were proper for them to eat meat, as much of the meat sold in the markets had been offered as sacrifices in pagan temples. Sexual conduct was a point of great concern. The ethic of sexual behaviour among believers raised in Judaism was much stricter than that of those raised in Roman culture. Former pagans had to be taught what sexual expression was pleasing to God. Paul wrote that the bodies of believers are temples of the Holy Spirit. Paul taught that God created human beings male and female. Paul taught the main purpose of sexual union is the procreation of children and the perpetuation of the human race. In contrast to a society in which a man could have multiple wives, he taught that we honour God with our sexual expression within the bounds of marriage between one man and one woman.

The Corinthian congregation was composed of people from diverse backgrounds. There were Jews and Gentiles. Gentile is a Hebrew expression for everyone not of Hebrew background. These Gentiles came from varied cultures and racial backgrounds. Jews and Gentiles needed to learn to live with each other in peace, respecting their varied cultural practices, as long as these practices were not contrary to the Christian faith. The Corinthian congregation was made up of people from different social and economic backgrounds. Some were rich and some were poor. The rich needed to learn not to debase the poor. They were all enriched by God in Christ. Some were slaves, others were free and some perhaps owned slaves. Slavery was part of the fabric of life in the ancient world. They needed to learn that we are all slaves of Christ, with one Master. We are all freed in Christ from slavery to sin, the devil and death. We are incorporated into the body of Christ through baptism into His death and resurrection. We are all gifted with the Holy Spirit to serve one another as sisters and brothers in Christ, children of the heavenly Father.

The Corinthian congregation was blessed with an abundance of gifts from the Holy Spirit. There were people gifted to speak words of wisdom. Others were gifted

to speak words of knowledge. Some prophesied. Some were able to distinguish between the Good Spirit and evil spirits. Some were gifted to heal, others to speak in the language of angels. Some were blessed with the insight of the Holy Spirit to interpret the angelic language. There were many gifts, but one Spirit who gave gifts according to His will. There were many believers, but one body of believers. Paul wrote, *“All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as He wills.”* All gifts were given by the Holy Spirit, not for the glory of the person who received them, but for the blessing and benefit of the whole body of believers. The Holy Spirit gifts us to serve God, the larger world with the gospel of Christ and the body of believers with the love of Jesus. We are gifted to serve.

Unfortunately, many people took their gifts not as empowerment to serve, but as a point of pride. They expressed these gifts not in acts of service, but rather in self-service. They used them not to give glory to God in Christ, but to draw attention to themselves. Instead of using them for the benefit and blessing of the whole body of believers, they used them to debase others and exalt themselves. In chapter four Paul writes, *“What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”*

This letter is in the bible not for historical interest, but because these issues continue to affect Christian congregations today. It's easy for us to take pride in ourselves and look down on others. It's easy for us to consider our needs as more pressing and ourselves as more important than others. Even in worldly terms there is nothing that we have not received, from the gift of life to our natural talents and abilities. This is even more so in the things of the Spirit. We are all gifted first and foremost with the love of God in Christ Jesus. We are all saved by His grace. We are all gifted with faith to receive His grace. We are all gifted to serve each other in love for the sake of Christ Jesus.

This first letter to the Corinthians is most well known for its epic poem to love in the thirteenth chapter. Paul writes, *“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not irritable or rude...Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”* This is not love in the abstract or human love in the highest form. It is the love of God expressed in Christ Jesus our Saviour. In that chapter Paul speaks of the gifts the Spirit gives to believers from the perspective of love. It is not the gifts that are of the greatest importance, it is the love of God in Christ Jesus that informs the gifts which is of the greatest value. He

says that if the gifts we have received are not informed by the love of Christ and expressed in love, they are nothing and benefit us nothing.

He writes, *“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. And 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. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”* Whatever gifts or talents we may have, they are nothing, if they are not received as gifts of God’s love and used in love for the sake of Christ Jesus. Whatever gifts and talents we may have received they are nothing if they are not expressed in love and used in service to others in the larger human community and within the body of Christ in particular. We are gifted to serve.

Paul uses the analogy of the human body to make his point about being gifted to serve one another in love. The human body is compared to the church, which is the body of Christ. As in the human body, so in the body of Christ there are no unimportant parts. Each part has its place of service to the life, health and well-being of the whole body. Some parts of the body are more essential to the life of the body than other parts, but no part is non-essential. The loss of any of the less essential parts of the body will affect the life and well being of the parts essential for life and well being. There may be some parts of our bodies that we could live without. But there are no parts of our bodies that we would want to live without. The church is the body of Christ. Each part has its place and purpose given by God. Each part is blessed with the love of God in Christ Jesus and with the Holy Spirit who dwells in each believer and enlivens the whole body through the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

Some parts of the body are given a greater honour and dignity than other parts. We give particular honour to certain members of the body of Christ, according to the gifts and responsibilities given them by the Holy Spirit. Paul writes, *“God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.”* Each part is honoured, but the honour goes to God who has given the gifts for the benefit and blessing of all. Paul writes, *“For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”* We honour each member because of the Spirit of Jesus that dwells among us and within each one of us.

The injury, suffering and loss of any part affects the honour, dignity and well-being of the whole body. Each part of the human body works together with the other parts for the common good of the whole body. So too the body of Christ is composed of many parts, each part dignified by the Spirit of Christ who dwells within the whole body of believers and in the body of each believer. The church is the body of Christ on earth. The head is Christ. The heart is the gospel of God's love in Christ Jesus. The breath is the Spirit who breathes faith into our hearts, gracing us with gifts as He sees fit for the honour of Christ. We are gifted to serve the world with the gospel of salvation and to serve one another in love. We honour Christ by honouring His body and treating each part with love and respect. We are gifted to serve one another in love. God grant this to us all. In Jesus' Name.