

## EPIPHANY 3C/LECTIONARY 3

January 24, 2010

*Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ*

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Nehemiah 8:1—3, 5—6, 8—10 Psalm 19 *I Corinthians 12:12—31a* Luke 4:14—21

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Today's message is part two of a three-part message focusing on our second reading from Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. As I talked about last week, Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians after he had already departed from them, when word had reached him in a letter that the Corinthian congregation was in the midst of conflict. There was division in the congregation over spiritual gifts, specifically, the gift of speaking in tongues.

In the part of this letter we looked at last week Paul begins his response by pointing out to the Corinthians that all spiritual gifts are given by the same Holy Spirit to all. And, all spiritual gifts are given for building up the community of Christ, the church.

Paul had already begun, in last week's text, to deconstruct this hierarchy of gifts that the people had constructed, where speaking in tongues was considered the highest spiritual gift. By pointing out that all gifts are from the same Holy Spirit, Paul has placed all spiritual gifts on the same plane.

Today's section of the letter continues that argument. Paul uses the metaphor of the human body to make his point that not only are all gifts of equal value, but each member – with their unique gifts – has a unique function in the body.

So what part of the body are you? Take, for instance, my dog's perspective. From his perspective, I am an opposable thumb. My sole function, from my dog's perspective, is to open doors. Let him in, let him out. Having an opposable thumb, which he lacks, makes it much easier for me to open doors than for him. And so, from his perspective, this is why God put me on earth – to serve as his opposable thumb.

But jesting aside, what part of the body are you? Paul says elsewhere that Christ is the head. Christ is the head, not only in the sense that he is the leader of the church, but he is also the head of the body. Christ is the brain, which directs the actions of all the members. And we are all the members, the various parts of the body.

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There's a story about a group of tools that came together for a meeting. Mr. Hammer presided. Brother Screwdriver said, “Brother Hammer must go, because he is always making noise, always knocking.”

Hammer said, “Brother Screwdriver has to go, because you have to turn him around all the time to get him to do his job.”

Someone else said, “Brother Plane has to go, because he always wants to just touch the surface. He never goes deep.”

Plane said, “Brother Sandpaper has to go then, because he is always rubbing people the wrong way.”

Sandpaper spoke up, “Then Brother Saw must go, because he is always cutting things up and leaving sawdust all over the place.”

Then the Carpenter from Nazareth came in and said, “I need all of you. We have a job to do. Put yourselves in my hands. Let me use you.”

Hammer said, “Here am I, Lord, use me.”

Screwdriver said, “Here am I, Lord, use me.”

Plane said, “Here am I, Lord, use me.”

Sandpaper said, “Here am I, Lord, use me.”

Saw said, “Here am I, Lord, use me.”

So when each gave himself to the Carpenter from Nazareth together they built: A church in which the Gospel could be preached. A bridge of understanding so different groups could come together. A house so that a home could be built. That is what happens when all the tools are used for the purpose for which they were made.

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Some of us may be gifted to be the eyes of the church, the ones to see injustice in the world. Others might be ears, hearing the cries of those in need. Some will be the mouth, to speak out against injustice and press the case of those in need. Others will be the hands and feet, responding in action to the needs of the world. And yet others will be the heart, pulling together the insights of the eyes and ears and the call of the mouth to help pull the arms and legs into action.

We need all members of the body to see the needs of the world. We need all members of the body to respond to the needs of the world. All members have a unique function.

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At the same time, the members are interdependent parts. All members of the body are necessary for carrying out the body's work. What good would it do for the eyes to see injustice, or the ears to hear the cries of those in need, without the heart to respond by calling the arms and legs into action? What good would it do for the mouth to speak out against injustice without being able to follow through in concrete, Christian action with the help of the heart, arms and legs?

Life in our own congregation is no different. It takes a variety of gifts, working together, to perform most of our ordinary tasks. Take, for instance, our involvement in serving lunch at Faith Kitchen just once a month. I don't know how long you all have been doing this, or who started Abiding Peace's involvement at Faith Kitchen, but it must have originally taken the eyes and ears seeing and hearing the need for us to get involved. The heart now responds to the need sensed by the eyes and ears to call others into action. The arms and hands are those of you who faithfully, month after month, make meals to be served at Faith Kitchen. And finally, there are the legs and feet, who take those meals down to Dover and serve them out to the hungry. It takes many people, all offering up their gifts and working together, to serve at Faith Kitchen every month.

Our weekly worship is another instance of a variety of gifts coming together to create a whole, unified service. Our weekly worship service requires:

- ◆ A variety of musicians – pianist, organist, guitarists, and vocalists;
- ◆ Acolytes;
- ◆ PowerPoint operators;
- ◆ Assisting ministers for liturgy and serving at communion;
- ◆ Lectors to read the lessons;
- ◆ A preacher; and,
- ◆ ushers and greeters.

Then there are those who work behind the scenes before the service to make sure all arrangements are in place, such as:

- ◆ The secretary who types and copies the bulletins;
- ◆ The proof-reader who checks the bulletins for accuracy;
- ◆ The altar guild who prepares the altar and sets the communion table;

and,

- ◆ The worship committee who helps to craft the service.

And, there are those who take care of details after the service, such as counting the offering and paying our church's bills. And where would we be without our property committee, who ensures that we have a comfortably heated, well-lit place to meet? And of course, all of this would be for naught without worshipers.

ALL of these people are necessary, and without any one of them participating in their unique way, using their unique giftedness, we would notice something was missing.

Just as we have come together in the one body of Christ, so when one member of that body is missing, we all feel the loss. You all know the feeling of having lost a member of the congregation – when someone moves away, dies, or simply stops participating in the body. You all know that sense of loss. It is as if we've lost a hand or a foot. Such is the interdependence of the body. All parts rely on the other parts, and when one doesn't participate, we all notice something is missing. The member's absence is felt.

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Paul concludes this section of his letter, after having said that the Holy Spirit grants a variety of gifts, that all are of equal value in God's eyes, and that all are interdependent, by stating that there are particular gifts that the Holy Spirit gives for leadership in the church. He lists apostles, prophets, teachers, “deeds of power,” gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, and finally, various kinds of tongues. It is from this list of gifts for leadership that the positions of deacon, presbyter and bishop quickly evolved, only within a few decades after Paul wrote this letter. *But*, Paul is quick to point out that no one person possesses all the necessary gifts, once again emphasizing the interdependence of the members of the body of Christ.

And then Paul makes this cryptic final statement in today's reading: “But strive for the greater gifts.” It is as if he is saying that there are spiritual gifts even greater than the ones he has discussed, that can somehow be achieved. Is it through study? Prayer? What are these “greater gifts,” and just how does one achieve them?

I guess you'll have to come back next week to find out.

Amen.

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