

All of Us
I Corinthians 12:12-27
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
January 27, 2019
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

It was at a volunteer appreciation dinner in the late 1990's in central Kansas that I first heard folksinger Ann Zimmerman. Among songs that name well both the joy and sorrow of life, she also shared songs that embraced the humor of life as well. It was there that I first heard the song, "The Plumber is the Man." Some of you may know this song from other artists, but in case you don't, let me share some of the lyrics:

*When the ice comes and the snow and it's twenty-eight below
And then the temperature begins to fall
And they hear the moan and whine of that frozen water line
Then the plumber is the man who saves them all.*

*O the plumber is the man, the plumber is the man.
Down into the cellar he must crawl.
He is not sleek and slim but they don't look down on him
For the plumber is the man who saves them all.*

*When the toilet will not flush and the odor makes you blush
And you cannot use the sink or shower stall,
Then your learning and your art slowly start to fall apart
But the plumber is the man who saves it all.*

*O the plumber is the man, the plumber is the man.
With his wrenches and his pipes he comes to call.
They can take their sins to Jesus but when their water freezes
Then the plumber is the man who saves them all.¹*

This catchy little tune takes a humorous approach to something that is very important to remember: there is no one who is dispensable...everyone has a role to play and it is often those we take most for granted that we find we can't live without.

This same sentiment is echoed in our scripture for today.

¹ Written by Garrison Keillor.

Today we read from what we know as the book of I Corinthians. It is good for us to pause occasionally and remember that most of the books that make up our New Testament were letters, correspondences sent usually between faith leaders and congregations.

I Corinthians is no different. It, along with what we call II Corinthians, makes up some of the correspondence between Paul and the Christian congregation in the city of Corinth, a congregation Paul had founded. What we see is that even though Paul was no longer physically present with them, after all his primary call was as a missionary, still he stayed in touch with congregations he had encountered and continued to give encouragement and instruction by writing letters.

And here in these verses from chapter 12, we hear the climax of something Paul started addressing right at the beginning of his letter. After all the congregation at Corinth was experiencing conflict and division. They had gotten caught up in judging people's faithfulness based on external signs of spirituality. They were also divided between those who preferred the leadership of Paul versus those who preferred other leaders.

So, it was into this mix that Paul sent this letter, a letter that reminded them that they were to set aside their pride, to set aside their loyalties to this person or that, to set aside their judgments of whose gifts were more important, and simply to be followers of Jesus, the one who valued all, the one who paid special attention to those who were pushed aside or undervalued. They were reminded that they were called not only to be followers of Jesus but to be one with each other in Jesus.

So, it was into this situation where people were taking sides and recognizing gifts such as speaking in tongues and prophesying with far more regard than other gifts, that Paul wrote.

But what about us? What does this say to us? See it's easy to think because we aren't experiencing divisions that are pulling us apart and because we celebrate the diversity in our midst, that we are immune to these struggles. It's easy to look around and see that people of various ages and backgrounds are called into leadership and to act as if we never have any of these problems.

So, if Paul's original letter was written in the face of conflict and division, is there really still anything for us to hear?

And the beautiful answer to that is that Paul's words continue to speak even if our situation isn't exactly the same.

After all there are important reminders here. First of all, as we hear Paul use this image of the body of Christ to talk about the church, we are reminded that Paul isn't the only one to use the image of the body. But it is important to note one difference. This image of the body is, in so many other places, one that remains hierarchical, one where the headship belongs to the leader who is seen as most important, as the one in charge. And yet, Paul says something different. Paul says that we all belong together and that together we all make up the body of Christ. Paul insists "that all members are *equally* important to the well-being of the body of Christ. No one is less important. No one brings less to the body."²

And this is a significant reminder. Even in our egalitarian ways, even as a congregation that values the gifts of various people, even as a congregation that welcomes the leadership of those who are young or those who are new or those who are less experienced, still it is easy to lean toward hierarchy. We can still fall into patterns that support views that say that one gift is more valuable or one experience more meaningful.

² J. Paul Sampley, "1 Corinthians" in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume X* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 948.

And so, Paul reminds us this isn't the case.

Just recently in our conversations about the new bylaws that are being proposed, we have talked about how it has been easy for the church over the years to treat some jobs like they are training for other jobs, as if you have to climb the ladder to roles of higher honor in the church. And yet Paul reminds us that it was never meant to be that way. Rather each of us is gifted in our own particular ways and all of our gifts are for the good of the church and even beyond that, for the good of the world.

So, whether your gifts are those that mean that you are upfront during worship and visible to all, or if they are those that mean that you are in the background, in roles that support more obvious ministries...the distinction doesn't matter. Both kinds of gifts make a difference and are equally important.

And while we can affirm this when we are sitting and talking about the scripture, the reality is that sometimes we forget to live into it. And this is why we need to keep hearing these words from Paul. Because even with this knowledge, we sometimes find that we like things our way and value most the people who think or act or look most like us, or we find that we are impressed with certain gifts and speak and act, even unintentionally, in ways that indicate to others that we believe they have more value. And so, we hear these words again today and we are reminded that not only are all gifts important, not only do all members of the body matter, but it is often those that we acknowledge less, who are even more indispensable.

Whether it is the plumber who especially on a cold winter day may be the one to save us or the trash collector who our culture doesn't lift up as one to be admired but who we would quickly miss if he or she wasn't doing their job...whether it is the person who cleans up communion after worship or cleans up the kitchen after a pot luck, or the one who keeps supplies

stocked for our ministries to happen...these people and roles who are less often noted are in so many ways the ones that make everything else possible. And Paul reminds us that all are of value.

And there is something else we don't want to miss. This image of the body of Christ isn't just about appreciating each other as diverse individuals who all have a purpose, but also about remembering how connected we are to each other. And, as people who live in a culture that values individualism above so much else, this is something we who are followers of Jesus need to remember.

Did you hear that line toward the end of our reading? Verse 26 says, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."³

Friends, the image of the body is a beautiful image, a great way to think about what Christian community is called to be. But if we take it seriously then we also must take this calling seriously...the calling to be present with each other, to work to truly listen and understand, to create safe spaces for people to be real.

Because there are too few safe spaces in our world. Whether it be spaces where we can safely confess our sins and our struggles...whether it be spaces in which we can be honest about who we are even when our identity is outside of the norm...whether it be simply spaces to celebrate the wonderful things that are going on in our lives...we need all of these.

We live in a world with an expectation of quick greetings of "How are you?" with responses of "I am fine." We live in a world where people too often experience shock or disappointment when they are honest even with their dearest friends. We live in a world where

³ | Corinthians 12:26, NRSV.

too often even our celebrations get dismissed as arrogance or bragging by those whose own jealousy gets in the way of their being happy for another.

But Paul reminds us that part of being the body of Christ together is not only about what gifts we all bring to the work that we share, but also about being truly present with each other, about being connected enough that we are impacted by the realities of one another's life.

What a challenging and wonderful calling this is. It is the calling to live in ways that create the kin-dom of God here on earth. It is the calling to live in ways that create space for all to belong just as they are. It is the calling to live in ways that say again and again that God's kin-dom isn't just for or about some of us, but it is for all of us.

May it be so.