

## “GIFTS FOR BUILDING THE COMMUNITY”

I Corinthians 12:14-31

November 13, 2016

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Stewardship Dedication Sunday... a time when we offer our financial commitments for the work of the church in the coming year. I am especially pleased that this year we have included our children in the offering as they bring stuffed animals which we will give to the Kalamazoo Department of Public Safety who will use these gifts as they connect to children in the midst of a crisis. These are gifts that signal our coming together around a common purpose: ministries of compassion, celebrations of the arts, earth care, spiritual nurture, and the worship of a loving God. They are expressions of gratitude for the love we have experienced in Jesus Christ, and the love we have felt with and for one another.

We didn't plan this party to follow the conclusion of the most rancorous election process in my memory at least. Despite the softening rhetoric of the candidates since Tuesday, emotions continue to run high. As is typical for pastors, I've heard more of the distress from the losing side, but I am not unaware that some of us view the results as a step forward for America. I'm happy to engage any of you in private conversation on this topic, but that is not my purpose today.

I don't want the events of the past week to distract us from the celebration of today, but they do present us with a particular challenge: the challenge that differences can present to the unity of the church. I've always loved this portrait of the church which Paul presents to the church at Corinth: many members and yet one body, an image that suggests that our differences actually make us stronger. After talking about these differences, Paul offers this image, an expression of our unity in verse 26: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." You can imagine my distress when I realized that there are times (like this past week) when differing members might suffer and rejoice over the same event. I thought about ignoring this part of the text, perhaps hoping that the dissonance with the present reality would go unnoticed. And then I wondered whether it might be possible for those who rejoice to understand the suffering of another or whether those who suffer might understand the joy of another.

Maybe it's a little naïve to believe so, but if such a thing is possible, it will require the gifts that Paul mentions in this chapter, gifts that build community, gifts that have brought us to this day of dedication and celebration. I refer not to the gifts mentioned at the end of this chapter (apostles, prophets, teachers), but the gifts of hearing, seeing, and feeling. The church is blessed to have people who teach, who understand the signs of the times, and people who heal among other useful things, but I think that the health of the body depends most on the church's ability to use all of its senses. The scriptures have always used the imagery of the senses to speak of our connection to God. "Hear, O Israel," says the writer of Deuteronomy, "The Lord, your God, is One." The psalmist

tells us “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” Paul offers thanks in his next letter to the church for Christ who “through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God...” (II Cor. 2:15). Luke tells the story of our risen Lord where he urges Thomas, “Touch me and see...”

There are few experiences more powerful than the experience of being heard. One of the most useful and wise pieces of advice I received from an elderly man in our first congregation was on the importance of listening. Hearing is essential in the process of mediation, when addressing the pain of another, when assisting a person through crisis, or when helping a person to find her or his voice. Hearing unlocks the heart and paves the path to forgiveness and reconciliation, and on the positive side to generosity.

In birding, hearing the sounds of a bird tells us whether it's a phoebe, a peewee, or a willow flycatcher – when you just see them, they look very alike. In the same way we don't really understand people or God until we've heard them. Hearing is critical in times like these. It is one of the gifts that bring us together and stand behind our celebration today.

And yet if the whole body were merely an ear, where would the sense of sight be? The church needs people who see, largely because there are so many invisible people in the world. Our ministries of compassion happen because we are willing to look out from our own boundaries to see the real needs of others: the homeless, the hungry, the refugee, the abused. The woman beaten by her husband doesn't want the world to see her injuries, the child who lacks confidence tries not to be noticed. And we are sometimes afraid to look upon another person's pain because it may dampen our own happiness, expose our failure, or feed our despair.

And yet because we have people gifted with sight, we have been able to look past the political divisions that separate us from Cuba. We have reached out to understand the pain and the beauty in the people of Perico, and they have in turn opened their hearts to us. We see and attend to the needs of this community of faith: those who are sick or recovering from surgery, our shut-ins, caregivers, folks struggling with depression. When we see the need, we respond. And by the grace of God, we have people gifted with sight.

It's important that each of us nurture the gift of sight, that we see one another as we are, that we see the world as it is, but community is built also as we see what we and the world might be. Ministry is not only about seeing the need, it's about envisioning a different future. The community of faith is constantly in motion, moving toward a better future and for this we have our visionaries, people for whom we offer thanks to God, who have brought us to this day of dedication and celebration.

Paul doesn't explicitly mention the sense of touch, but I can't imagine the church without those gifted in feeling. There are, of course, the countless ways in which physical touch encourages us: holding hands in prayer before surgery, hugs at a memorial service, or the kiss on the cheek that speaks of friendship. Some find these expressions too

intimate, but are still moved by the ministry of physical presence: a smile, sitting with them in worship, or joining them around the table at a shared meal. Joined to these concrete expressions of touch are the metaphorical touches: feelings of belonging, of trust, and of love. "In this," said Jesus, "shall the world know that you are my disciples, that you love one another as I have loved you."

We are here this morning ready to dedicate ourselves to the future ministry of this congregation because we have built a community of faith. We have done this by hearing one another and hearing the cries of the world around us. We have done this with eyes that see into the sorrows and joys that shape each of us and the world in which we live. We have envisioned a better future for ourselves and the world beyond us. But most of all, we are here because we have been touched by God and by one another. We have experienced love, and our desire is to extend love. We dedicate our financial commitments. We bring gifts to serve the needs of children in difficulty. But we celebrate these things because the gifts of hearing, seeing and touching have built us into the body of Christ. We rejoice because we have experienced what Paul describes as a "more excellent way."

These gifts did not bring us to agreement on the best hymns or the correct way to worship. They did not bring consensus on which missions we should support or what programs we should continue. But they did build us into a community of faith, a place where conversation about our differences can take place. I imagine that fostering these gifts might take the divisions that we are currently experiencing as a nation and instead build community there as well. Hearing and being heard, seeing and being seen, touching and being touched don't always bring agreement; but they do create a safe space in which the discussion could take place. They help define a path to the more excellent way, the way of love, which is what we are really celebrating today by the grace of God through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.