

We All Have a Part to Play

(1 Corinthians 12: 8-26)

Well we made it to the finals! The Flames are in the finals because, as one of the CBC commentators mentioned, it isn't the name on the back of their sweaters that is most important to them but the name on the front. The Flames are playing as a team. Because of this they realize that each of them is an integral part of the whole and no one of them is thinking I can win this without the help of the rest of the players. The Calgary Flames are the Western Conference Champions because, like a body, they are interdependent.

If Paul had lived in Calgary and was speaking to us today he may very well have said that the way the Flames have been playing this playoffs is analogous to how the church is to function. Each has a part to play and no one can think he or she doesn't need the rest of the team.

Paul is aware of two dangers that face the body of Christ. We can either say, "I am useless and have no part in the body", or we can say "I am self-sufficient and do not need to rely on the rest of the body".

He addresses the tendency to think we are useless in verses 15-16. There he writes.

"If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body."

He then underscores that all parts of the body are necessary:

"If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body."

At verse 21 he speaks of another ailment that effects the Church. This is the tendency to think we are self-sufficient and so we don't rely on each other.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; 24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.

These verses underscore for us that the Christian Community is to be the place where everyone belongs and all are to care for each other. This is accentuated in verse 26 where Paul writes: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it, if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it."

I want to pause here for a minute and reflect on what it means to suffer together. In our compassion, we don't like to see people suffer. And so our instincts are aimed at preventing and alleviating suffering. No doubt that is a good impulse. But if we really want to reach out to others who are suffering, we should be careful not to do our "helping" with the presumption that we can fix things, get rid of them, or make them "better." We may look at our suffering friends and imagine how they could have better marriages, better-behaved children, better mental and emotional health, But when we rush in to fix suffering, we need to keep in mind several things.

First, no matter how insightful we may be, we don't really understand the full nature of our friends' problems. Second, our friends may not want our advice. Third, the ironic fact of the matter is that more often than not, people do not suffer less when they are committed to following God, but more. When these people go through suffering, their lives are often transformed, deepened, marked with beauty and holiness, in remarkable ways that could never have been anticipated before the suffering.

So, instead of continuing to focus on preventing suffering - which we probably won't be very successful at anyway - perhaps we should enter the suffering, participating insofar as we are able-entering the mystery and looking around for God. In other words, we need to quit feeling sorry for people who suffer and instead look up to them, learn from them, and-if they will let us-join them in protest and prayer. Pity can be nearsighted and condescending; shared suffering can be dignifying and life-changing.

As we live this way more intentionally, Paul teaches in this chapter that there will be a manifestation of the Spirit's presence in the body in ways that will be varied but equal. In Corinth the Christians seemed to be pre-occupied with one spirit manifestation, speaking in tongues. They thought all should manifest this gift. But Paul says no. Just as the whole body isn't an eye, so too not all will speak in tongues.

What he does say is that we should expect the Spirit to manifest himself within the community in various ways, thus showing that the body of Christ is both diverse and united. This is why he gives two lists of spirit giftings in chapter twelve. He is not concluding by this that the lists are exhaustive but he is saying that these gifts are typical of a congregation growing in their understanding of what it means to be interdependent.

The utterance of wisdom revealed by the Spirit, is not some special understanding of the "deeper things" or "mysteries" of God,. Rather, it is the recognition that the message of Christ crucified is God's true wisdom. This is a recognition that comes only to those who have received the Spirit. Paul has prepared us back in chapter two for what he is saying here. At 2.6 and following he writes:

Yet among the mature we do speak **wisdom**, though it is not a **wisdom** of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. 7 But we speak God's **wisdom**, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11 For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. 13 And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

Not only is wisdom given so that we can better understand the message of the Cross but the Spirit gives us wisdom so that we can better understand the gifts God is bestowing upon us.

(2) **The utterance of knowledge**. Some have suggested that Paul here has in mind a supernatural endowment of knowledge, factual information that could not otherwise

have been known without the Spirit's aid. It could also be referring to something more akin to inspired teaching, perhaps related to receiving Christian insight into the meaning of Scripture.

Both of these gifts are given to us so that we more fully understand the message of the Gospel. As such these are gifts that are given generously to those who have faith in Jesus Christ. We can see this illustrated by the way two people view the Bible. To the disciple the Bible is the most precious book we have. To the non-believer it is meaningless and worthless. What is the difference? Well the Christian has the Spirit of God at work in their life. They know that God's word imparts to us true knowledge about God so that we can live more wisely as followers of God.

Faith With this word Paul moves on to include several more clearly supernatural manifestations of the Spirit, While it is true that Paul considers the "faith" that leads to salvation to be the work of the Spirit in the believer's life, what he has in mind here is the special gift of supernatural faith that can "move mountains," mentioned again in 13:2. It probably refers to a supernatural conviction that God will reveal his power or mercy in a special way in a specific instance. It can also be understood as the growing conviction that God is good and true when faced with overwhelming suffering and difficulty. Although the outward circumstances of our lives would confirm for the unbeliever that God is not for real, the follower of Jesus has an inner conviction that God is with me in this. This kind of faith is captured movingly in a prayer found at the end of the prophet Habakkuk:

"Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls,
18 yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.
19 GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights."

Gifts of healings. Jesus, Paul, and the rest of the early church lived in regular expectation that God would heal people's physical bodies. This expectation was based

in part on the OT promises that in the messianic age God would "heal" his people. According to Acts, such healings accompanied Paul's own ministry.

It is important to point out that the literal phrase in verse 9 is not "gifts of healing" but "gifts of healings" -- two plurals. I think this probably means that different kinds of gifts for different kinds of healings are given to various people according to God's sovereign will. This alone would suggest that one person will not have a monopoly on every sort of healing that is necessary. And it suggests that there will be many times when a person with some gifts to heal will not be able to heal.

This was Paul's experience. God gave him the grace to heal the crippled man in Lystra (Acts 14:10) and many people in Ephesus (Acts 19:12) and the demonized girl in Philippi (Acts 16:18) and Eutychus when he was taken up dead after falling out of a window (Acts 20:9-10). But Paul could not heal himself from the thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:8-9) or from the ailment that he had when he preached in Galatia (Gal. 4:13-14). And evidently he could not heal Timothy from his stomach ailments (1 Tim. 5:23) or Epaphroditus from his life threatening sickness (Phil. 2:26-27) or Trophimus whom he "left ill at Miletus" (2 Tim. 4:20). Sometimes Paul was given gifts of healings and sometimes he wasn't. God is sovereign in this affair. Nothing is mechanical or automatic.

So the wording of 1 Cor. 12:9 as well as Paul's own experience teach us that there are varied gifts of healings that can be given to us at different times for different illnesses but no guarantees that because we have received a gift to heal in the past we will receive one in any specific case in the future. Verse 11 says it is the Spirit who "apportions the gifts to each one individually as he pleases." He is sovereign and can give or withhold a gift of healing whenever he deems best.

(5) Miraculous powers (lit. "workings of miracles"). Although Paul would probably include gifts of healing under "workings of miracles," this manifestation most likely covers all other kinds of supernatural activities beyond the healing of the sick.

Prophecy: As Paul will make clear in chapter fourteen it is the gift of prophecy that we should ask God for above all others. Paul's understanding - as well as that of the other NT writers - of the prophetic gifting was thoroughly conditioned by his own history in Judaism. The prophet was a person who spoke to God's people under the inspiration of the Spirit. The "inspired utterance" came by revelation and announced

judgment (usually) or salvation Often the word spoken had a futuristic element, so in that sense they also came to be seen as "predictors"; but that was only one element, and not necessarily the crucial one.

Distinguishing between spirits. Given what Paul says in chapter 14.29 where he writes: "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said" Paul probably is referring here to the importance for the church to properly judge or discern prophecies. This seems all the more likely in this case since these two are followed immediately by "tongues" and "interpretation." This same pattern of tongues plus interpretation and prophecy plus discernment is found again in the instructions on order in 14:26-29.

This passage invites us as a congregation to recognize that God desires to manifest his presence within our fellowship in a variety of ways. As we reflect on what it means to be interdependent and grow in really caring for each other, let us also pray Lord, please show us more of yourself within our fellowship as you manifest the Spirit's presence in the ways you desire. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.