

Lia Scholl
Sermon
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1 Corinthians 12

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁷ 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. ²¹ 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. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

As many of you know, Erica Saunders has been our intern for very nearly a year.

I have been amazed at her intelligence,
her capacity for ministry,
and her insight,
not only into this congregation,
but into power structures,
gender inequities,
and the Greek Bible.

She's awesome... And we're celebrating her this week.

There are two things I've learned from her this year that keep rolling over and over in my head.

The first is something she said in a sermon.

It was something like this, "The last shall be first and the first shall be last" still means that there's a hierarchy."

All this expectation of an upside world has been that the oppressed become the oppressor. What would the world look like without anyone being first and no one being last?

Let's just jump into today's text.

27-31 You are Christ's body—that's who you are! You must never forget this. Only as you accept your part of that body does your "part" mean anything. You're familiar with some of the parts that God has formed in his church, which is his "body":

*apostles
prophets
teachers
miracle workers
healers
helpers
organizers
those who pray in tongues.*

But it's obvious by now, isn't it, that Christ's church is a complete Body and not a gigantic, unidimensional Part? It's not all Apostle, not all Prophet, not all Miracle Worker, not all Healer, not all Prayer in Tongues, not all Interpreter of Tongues. And yet some of you keep competing for so-called "important" parts.

Throughout the ages, Christians have tried to set up a hierarchy of roles in the church: apostles first, prophets second, teachers next, ad nauseam. The church has set up from the elite to the ordinary, from the pulpit (with the biggest hats, in the Episcopal and Catholic churches) to just you folks in the pews.

What if we got it all wrong? What if we are all equal, neither first nor last, but just have different roles?

This came most clear to me pastoring a Mennonite church.

Mennonites have the flattest ecclesial structure I have ever seen.

In fact, historically, they drew straws for the minister.

That didn't make him better than anyone else—

that made the congregation responsible for his farm,
and him responsible for preaching, teaching and visiting the sick.

There wasn't even that much of a learning curve—these were people whose lives were steeped in Scripture and worship.

You know, on a personal note here, I have my own fears about the change coming to the Church (that's capital-C CHURCH). I believe that the professional class of clergy is going away, that the social status of ministry, the benefits of a specialized degree, the role we play as leaders of the church *is going away*. Much of it is already gone.

And, well, frankly, that scares the BEJESUS out of me.

But back to our text. Paul started this church in Corinth.

He nourished and nurtured them.

And he loved them in the way only a pastor can.

Then he moved on to his missionary travels,
and heard stories about the Corinth church.

The people of the church in Corinth had so spiritualized their experience with God that they were ignoring their daily needs, the part of life that is about the physical—
intimacy with their spouses,
tending to their physical needs,
maturing as people and as Christians.

They were stuck on the mountaintop, speaking in tongues, all the time. Sounds great, doesn't it?

Only it wasn't.

They were, well, competing with one another.

Who is the most spiritual?

Who is the best speaker in tongues?

Who's in charge? And conflict had broken out.

You see... the church is nothing if it isn't grounded in the lives of the people who come there day in and day out.

The church is nothing if it doesn't impact our daily lives

OUTSIDE of the doors of this church.

The church is nothing if it isn't changing the status quo,

disrupting the evil of the day,

fighting the injustices of the hierarchies.

That is the reason the church is in flux today.

The church in Corinth began to reflect the worst parts of Greek society.

And the church today has done the same thing.

We reflect not the image of God, but the image of capitalism.

We reflect not the kingdom of God, where the last are first,
but instead the fight for being first.

We reflect not the work that God is doing in our world and in our hearts,
but the work that sin is doing in the world and in our hearts.

Whew! I said it. Sin.

But Paul tells the people of Corinth: "There is a better way."

I mentioned that Erica had given me two thoughts that were rolling around in my head.

The second is a quote she heard from a professor.

The professor said, "Worship is practice for the kingdom of God."

And I've expanded that in my head to think about church... this church... as practice for the kingdom of God.

Hold that thought for a minute.

If church is practice for the kingdom of God, how do we do that?

Paul tells us, there is a better way.

Let's turn the page, just one page, to the 13th chapter of Corinthians.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² 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 do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends.

Love is the better way.

You get it? No impatience. hierarchies. Love.

No jealousy. Love.

No rude behavior. Love.

No selfishness. Love.

No irritability. No lies.

Love. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

That's the kingdom of God.

I said last week that the kingdom of God looks like

“collaboration,

compassion,

curiosity,

non-possessive love,

play,

mediation,

and the patience that comes from seeing ourselves in a much longer arc of time than we are encouraged to see in the instantaneous culture of the modern world.” adrienne maree brown

This Kingdom of God is born in the nature of who God is,

a God who looks like us and a God who looks like the person standing next to us.

A God who is the Alpha and the Omega,

and somewhere in between and none of the above.

This Kingdom of God is born in the nature of who we are...

called to be different from one another,

like hands and feet, so that we can have everything we need.

This Kingdom of God is reflected in the roles we play—

not roles that are better or worse, but different roles—

so that the world can change to who it needs to be, s

o that we can have everything we need.

The kingdom of God is love, and we practice it here.

Some of us teach, some of us mother, some of us learn, some of us pray, some of us march, some of us sing, some of us bake, some of us run sound. But we all have a role to play.

The kingdom of God is love, and we practice it here.