

“Common Good” A sermon by Lee Ireland  
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church  
January 27, 2019, Third Sunday after Epiphany  
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Let us pray together: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

Last Sunday we talked about spiritual gifts. I passed out a sheet with the definitions of the spiritual gifts Paul mentioned in last week’s scripture reading from 1 Corinthians. I also passed out a spiritual gifts inventory, which I asked you to return to me after you had scored the inventory. How many have completed the inventory? Please return them to me with your name on them. If you didn’t do it and would still like to, there are additional copies on the stand near the exit door.

I mentioned last week that the gifts of the spirit, our spiritual gifts, are given by God to build up the church. They are given to strengthen each other’s faith and to enable our ministries to prosper. Each of us has been given spiritual gifts, that if used together, in conjunction with others, allow us to be more than the sum of the parts.

I gave an example of our church’s monthly potluck as an illustration of the spiritual gifts of the people in this church. People bring their special dishes to the potluck. I mentioned Jeffrey brings his chicken salad. Mary makes a delicious casserole. Nancy makes deviled eggs. Kevin creates interesting desserts.

Individually are these dishes a meal? Would you want to dine only on Nancy’s deviled eggs? Well, I could, but deviled eggs do not a complete meal make. It is only when everyone contributes and joins together that we have a complete meal, a delicious meal at that! The meal is more than the sum of the parts.

That was my illustration of how the Spirit has distributed spiritual gifts to those who love God. Paul has, in today’s scripture, provided his illustration of the distribution of spiritual gifts. He uses this example, the human body, to illustrate those two words I mentioned from last week’s reading: common and good. Common good means that we work together to make things better for everyone involved.

You could say that this week’s reading illustrates working together, using our spiritual gifts for the common good. Let’s take a more in-depth look at today’s reading.

Paul’s use of the body for an illustration may have appeared only once in the Bible, but was a familiar image used in the Roman world especially by politicians and philosophers. Their use of the illustration was to support a social hierarchy. Their point was the everyone needs a head of the body, a leader. What was not said, but understood, was that the leader was better than others. Society had a leader but needed hands and feet, the workers to do the dirty work, so to speak. This image is still used today to support the social hierarchy in the USA. Many leaders believe that they are the ones that are smarter and better and they know what’s best for everyone else, even though they never ask everyone else what might be best for them.

Paul takes this familiar image of the body to illustrate his point about spiritual gifts, taking it in a totally different direction. Paul says; the body is so arranged by God so that **there be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If**

**one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.** For those in power in Paul's day, this is a radical idea. For those in power today, this is a radical idea. We are to care for everyone and if one person suffers, we all suffer. If one person is honored, we all rejoice together.

Perhaps this idea that when one person suffers, we all suffer may be why many of us feel so sad when we read stories about families being separated at the border or of children in Cathedral City going hungry or being homeless or learning of an elderly person who was found dead in their home a week after the death. Yes, when one part of the body suffers, all suffer.

We live in a country that values individualism. When I read these verses from Paul, I don't believe he's talking about a unity that stifles individualism. I say this because Paul is using this example of the body to illustrate the gifts of the spirit. Each of us has gifts that contribute to the whole. Our gifts were given to us to benefit the whole. Without the individual gifts, we could not be a whole church serving Christ. God wants each of us to be the best we can be and express ourselves with the gifts God has given us working together with others to do God's will on earth.

If the church doesn't work together as Paul illustrates, then the church is diseased as Rick Warren explains: "Your body has nine different systems (circulatory, respiratory, digestive, skeletal, etc.). When these systems are all in balance, it produces health. But when your body gets out of balance, we call that "disease." Likewise when the body of Christ becomes unbalanced, disease occurs. Health and growth can only occur when everything is brought into balance." ("Church growth is okay, but church health is what matters," Pastors.com, February 20, 2015. Retrieved August 10, 2015)

Rick Warren would agree with Paul, we need a church that is in balance. But sometimes this living together as the balanced church is not easy. Sometimes it's not easy to treat others as we would like to be treated. Sometimes we aren't inclined to teamwork, cooperation, working together for the common good. Common good – there's those two words again.

The kids, 8 to 11 years old, are playing baseball, and the coach is getting frustrated.

At one point during a game, he says to one of his young players, "Do you understand what cooperation is? What a team is?"

The little boy nods in the affirmative.

"Do you understand that what matters is not whether we win or lose, but that we do it together as a team?"

Once again, the kid nods. Yes, he understands.

"So," the coach continues, "when a strike is called, or you're out at first, you don't argue or curse or attack the umpire. Do you understand all that?"

Again, the little boy nods.

"Good," says the coach. "Now go over there and explain it to your mother."

Yes, we know what we're supposed to do, but we don't always do it! The living together Paul advocates is not always easy. However, all is not lost. We can live together harmoniously

because of the Holy Spirit and the gifts the Holy Spirit gives each of us. Remember, Paul is using the body image to illustrate how the gifts of the spirit enable us to bring glory to God. So, if the going gets a little rough, have faith and remember that each person is a child of God with gifts meant to compliment yours.

One last thought about today's reading from First Corinthians. These verses are about individuals within the body of Christ and how we all work together. But I'd like to expand this concept just a bit. Paul explicitly states in verse 27: **Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.** His words have a larger meaning than just being individual members of the body of Christ. Shouldn't we, the church, the body of Christ, act like Christ? Christ had compassion on the poor, he healed others, he taught, he fought for justice and for equality within the society in which he lived. I say every Sunday, when **we share Jesus' compassion with those we meet by loving and serving others as Jesus did, we bring glory to God.** We can think of this loving and serving on two levels – the church as a whole and how it serves Christ and the individuals in the church and how they apply their talents to serve Christ.

This church does operate on both levels – very successfully. The whole body works together to show Christ's love to those outside the church. For example, the food distribution to food deficient families of high school students. And the individuals in the church use their gifts of the spirit to keep the whole church healthy, by loving and caring for each other, by being Christ to each other.

That's why I like the illustration of our potluck. Everyone contributes enabling the whole body to enjoy a great meal. And guests to our church that day share in that great meal.

May we continue to feed and care for each other using our gifts of the spirit and may the church as a body continue to care and feed those outside the body . . . by loving and serving others as Jesus did. Remember, your spiritual gifts are for the common good.