

## 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

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. 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.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to 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. And if the ear were to 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. 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? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 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; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may 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.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 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. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts.

### **The Gifts That Are Hardest to See**

This is Week 3 of our “Greater Gifts” worship series, and incidentally there are booklets on the literature table downstairs that will help you in discerning your spiritual gifts. I will also be leading workshops in Lent that are focused on helping you discover those gifts and how you use them in ministry, cooperative or individual. Anyway, we began this series on Greater Gifts two weeks ago, and I mentioned how God gives us 3 important gifts through baptism; a sense of identity, a sense of security, and a sense of ability – what God communicated to Jesus at his baptism he communicates to all of us: “You are mine, you are beloved, and I’m well-pleased with you.” Last week I spoke about a fourth gift, which was a sense of purpose, that as Christians we have a goal toward which we work together, and that goal is to proclaim the kingdom of God through word and deed. God’s kingdom is a kingdom of perfect love, perfect peace, and perfect justice, and so our goal is not just personal transformation (becoming a good person) but social transformation (working to make our communities more just, more peaceful, and more compassionate, particularly with regard to those in our communities who face the greatest challenges, because God’s desire is that all people would be citizens of God’s kingdom of love, peace, and justice. And the Church should exemplify this perfect kingdom of God, and the Church should work as a well-

coordinated team to advance the kingdom of God. We are a team where every player has something valuable to offer to help us achieve our goal, and no player is any less important than any other player.

But do our actions really demonstrate the belief that every member is important? In our scripture lesson today, Paul writes that “the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor.” Do we really believe that? Aren’t we more likely to honor those who get the most work done, who save us the most money, who contribute the most to our ministries? Today I want to challenge you to see those gifts that are so easy to overlook, and to see them as absolutely essential to the ministries of the church. Particularly I want you to recognize that those who we often think of as short on gifts, people who we call disabled, as people with gifts that are vital to the church and the Christian community.

And let me begin by saying that even the doctrine of the church can be such as to overlook the giftedness of those we classify “disabled.” In the United Methodist Church we draw a distinction between a *baptized* member of the church and a *professing* member of the church – a professing member is someone who has either completed the confirmation process or a new member class and *professes* their faith to the congregation. Not everyone is able to understand the creeds that we recite much less the particular beliefs that make us Methodist, and while we do not require that anyone pass a test in order to be baptized or partake of the Lord’s Supper we don’t provide a pathway for the mentally challenged to gain full status as a professing member. And we’re usually okay with this; we tend to look upon a person with disability not as one who ministers to others but as one who must be ministered to, as the *recipient* of our prayers and our service. We love them and we “accept” them, but we don’t recognize them as offering anything back. We don’t doubt that God loves them and welcomes them into his presence when their life on earth ends, but we don’t see them as people we should “clothe with greater honor” than those who lead our Sunday school or outreach ministry. We don’t put plaques up recognizing them for their contributions to the church. Their names are not the ones recorded in church archives. The church certainly welcomes them, but are we able to recognize them as an integral and essential part of the church, as those who should be clothed with greater honor than others?

I’d like to tell you a little story of a friend of mine who I lost contact with many years ago when I was still in college - undergraduate. His name was Jimmy, and Jimmy was in his late twenties and had Down Syndrome. I’m embarrassed to say that I don’t remember Jimmy’s last name because at that time I did not give the same level of attention to people like Jimmy that I would give to people I went to college with; his last name didn’t seem important to me. Jimmy was just Jimmy to me. I met Jimmy at a Chesterfield High School football game (Chesterfield High School was where my father’s second wife was the music teacher). Jimmy was a regular at the football games, and he and I were both cheering for the same time. Now I had recently had a religious awakening; I had been involved in a campus Christian ministry at the University of Virginia and, to borrow a phrase from John Wesley, my heart had been strangely warmed by the Spirit of God. I was an enthusiastic Christian, and God’s love had really affected to the point where I was trying my best to love everyone. I say that I was trying my best because I still had a lot of anger issues, and as I reflect upon it, I was severely limited in my ability to love anyone besides myself. And I looked upon Jimmy as one of “the least of these,” as one that Jesus was instructing me to love, and if I wanted to get in good with Jesus I needed to love Jimmy. And so I got to know him at

this football game, and we continued to correspond over the course of year – I'd see him at football games; I think we actually wrote a few letters to each other when I was away at college. About a year after meeting Jimmy we were at a football game, and Jimmy asked if I'd like to come to his trailer for a cup of coffee. I accepted the invitation, but I must confess that in my mind I was thinking, "Boy, this must be such a great thing for Jimmy – me, a non-disabled college student going to his home for coffee. Now I look back and humbly confess that it never crossed my mind to invite Jimmy over for coffee at my dad's house. I wanted Jimmy not so much as a friend but as a trophy, as someone I could point to and say, "I'm a good Christian; I'm able to love and befriend someone who is so much less gifted than me." Thank God I've grown up a little, and I can think back to that evening and drinking coffee in Jimmy's "home," and I can see in Jimmy not one of the least of these but rather I can see Jesus. I can see a heart that is pure and truly values my company, my presence, my friendship despite all my egotism and my pride. Jesus said, "Unless you turn and *become like children*, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Jimmy's gift to me was his pure heart, a heart that did not look to my many flaws but found joy simply my company.

We live in a world where ability is defined economically to the point where there have been attempts to sterilize or even euthanize those we deem "disabled." But God can open our eyes to the true giftedness of so many of the people we call disabled. In 2001 the movie "I Am Sam" told the story of a mentally challenged father trying to raise a young daughter. Sam, played by Sean Penn, has a job and a community of friends that support him in his effort to raise his daughter Lucy, who loves her father dearly. Social service agencies are concerned that Sam does not have the "ability" to raise a daughter and Sam is challenged to meet the state's expectations in providing for his daughter Lucy. In the film I'm about to show you, Sam and his close friends have brought Lucy to a shoe store because her school requires that she have good shoes for school. Have a look...

I wonder if you were able to see the church in that video. What makes a good church is not a bright, beautiful sanctuary, it's not huge outreach program or education ministry. It's not an eloquent pastor who is broadcast on television or radio. It's a loving community that works together to take care of whatever needs to be taken care of at that time, where no one person is considered more gifted or valuable than any other, and everyone gives what they can. And what a witness that is to the world. That store clerk will never be the same because of what he witnessed that day.

"The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor." May God grant you the eyes and the heart to see that his greatest gifts are often found in those we think are the least gifted. Amen.