

This Week at the Creek

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Here's the text from the pastor's Sunday message:

With Thy Spirit, Fill Me

1 Corinthians 12:4-13

May 4, 2008

A sheriff's deputy in a small town stopped a motorist who was speeding down the parkway. "Deputy," the man began, "I can explain." "No explanation needed!" snapped the deputy. "I'm going to let you cool your heels in jail until the sheriff gets back." The man tried again: "But deputy, I really can explain; I'm on my way to a ..." "Just keep quiet! You're going to jail and I'm not interested in anything you have to say!" the deputy barked. A few hours later the deputy looked in on his prisoner and said, "Lucky for you the sheriff is at his daughter's wedding. Maybe—just maybe—he'll be in a good mood when he gets back." "Don't count on it," answered the fellow in the cell. "I'm the groom!"

It's kind of hard to have a wedding when the groom is missing! Like you've surely heard it said multiple times: It takes two to tango. It was a basketball player as great as Michael Jordan who told the management in the Chicago Bulls front office that no matter how good one player is, the Bulls would never win a championship until they put together a good team. And frankly, the church is no different. No single pastor or prophet or priest can compose or do the work of the church. The church is **corporate**; the church is a **community**; the church is a **team**.

Indeed, the apostle Paul compared the church to a human body, pointing out that each part of the body has a specific function that is necessary to the body as a whole. God made the parts of the body different for a purpose, and it's within those differences that the parts must work together. That's why Paul coined the phrase "the body of Christ" for the church. Christ is the only head, and the unified body that He directs is composed of multiple bones and muscles and organs and nerves.

In the same way, the church is composed of many types of people from a variety of backgrounds with a multitude of gifts and abilities. But it's very easy for these differences to divide us, as was the particular case in Corinth. Don't

forget how the Corinthian Christians practically erupted in divisive bickering – and a lot of that bickering was over the relational problems arising when some of them flaunted their personal spiritual giftedness while putting others down. From the church at Corinth comes a reminder to us today to avoid two common errors: being so proud of our God-given talents that we let seep in feelings of superiority; and the direct opposite, thinking that we have nothing to contribute to the working of the church. The apostle stringently taught that instead of comparing ourselves to one another, we should use our different gifts together to **complement** one another – for the purpose and the sake of **spreading** the Gospel.

For in spite of all our differences, all of us as believers have one thing in common – and that is faith in Jesus Christ. It's on this essential truth that the church finds its unity. "We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body," called the church. By means of His one Spirit, we all said goodbye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which Christ has the final say in everything. We still maintain our individual identities, but brought together we have an overriding oneness in Jesus Christ. When we become a Christian, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in us, and we're born into God's vast family. The old labels we once used to identify ourselves are no longer useful. Paul wanted the church – then and today – to think about how this keeps our significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For **no matter how significant** we are, it's **only** because of what we're a **part** of. As members of God's family, it's true that we may have different interests and gifts, but it's also true that we're brought together into one family by the Holy Spirit.

Just as the Holy Spirit has come in a variety of ways – as a flame of fire, as a mighty wind, as a dove – so the Spirit comes into each of us in a different way, bringing different gifts and talents and abilities into our lives. But this array – this variety – of gifts that we all receive comes from the same Spirit of God. And having different spiritual gifts is a good thing because they give us different means by which we can use to help each other and make the church stronger. In fact, through the working out of these spiritual gifts, the church becomes equipped – through our working together – to do some rather magnificent ministry in this world!

It's a mysterious thing! When we take the few spiritual gifts in each member of our church and get them plugged into a congregation, we have something amazingly more than just a group of spiritual people. We have a proclaiming, teaching, healing, miracle-working, spirit-discerning organism that can – if it will come together and live up to its potential – minister powerfully throughout our surrounding community. But connectivity is of supreme importance! The message the apostle tried to get across time and again in this passage is that the church needs to be both **gifted** and **connected** – for when it is, it can change the world!

Once again, take note that each of us has been gifted in a different way. That means that uniformity is not to be expected – much less forced. Paul said if each of us had the same gift, we wouldn't be able to perform the multitude and variety of ministries required of a church in such a complex and chaotic society. So sure, we can value our own diversity for each of our gifts comes from the same Spirit; sure, we can value our own diversity for each gift is directed toward building up the same body of Christ. Every single one of you has at least one gift to offer the church, a gift that has a distinct and definitive role to play in ministry. Therefore, there need not be any rivalry, discontent, or feelings of superiority in our community of faith.

Still, it's clear to see how concerned the apostle was about this God-given spiritual innovation. He was quite worried that new Christians could still be under the influence of the wild, pagan religious sensations that they had grown used to in the Corinthian culture – ecstatic experiences that were intensely personal and didn't connect them to the larger body of believers. In the pagan religious practices of that day, the private experience was stressed at the expense of the community's sharing of the spiritual gift. And this, to Paul, was thoroughly unacceptable in the Christian church. Yes, Christians differ from each other; and yes, conformity cannot be imposed. But each believer has a gift and that gift was to be offered to and for the church; no member has a gift for his or her private use. Once again we find the emphasis that connectivity is of supreme importance.

Throughout his letter to the church at Corinth, the apostle emphasized that the purpose of a spiritual gift is to build up the church – the body of Christ. The Spirit, while manifesting itself in different ways, draws everybody together into a unified community. To Paul, a divided church is no church at all; it's like a cell phone with no network. His constant refrain was that spiritual gifts are for mutual edification, something that can't happen if everyone is doing his or her own thing without the direction of the Holy Spirit. So it is that putting a gift of the Spirit into every Christian at first gives us a billion slightly spiritual Christians; truly great things cannot happen until these gifts are somehow linked!

Of course, all of the apostle's emphasis on unity within diversity calls into question the behavior of growing numbers of Americans who claim to be religious, believe in God and even Christ, and yet drop out of organized church life or at least fade to its periphery. In a land still heavily influenced by a heritage of rugged individualism, we believers need to work ever harder to demonstrate that Christianity is not a merely personal religion but fundamentally a corporate one. Sometimes even our evangelical language for conversion betrays this bias: that we have a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ." Yes, that most certainly is the necessary starting point, but we dare not stop until that relationship with Christ leads to intimate interpersonal relationships with other Christians!

Think about it again: When all the various gifts of the Spirit are linked together in the church, something wonderful and marvelous and mysterious happens. Large numbers of people with a tremendous variety of gifts come together to produce an explosive effect not otherwise possible. In other words, the **sum** is greater than the **parts**! And this is exactly the way God intends for us to be. Just look around, and you'll see that links are everywhere. When we as Christians are linked by the Spirit into a community of faith, our individual spiritual gifts create a fabulous power called the body of Christ. Just look around, and you'll see that we have wonderful variety – almost strangely so – but the Spirit makes us one in Christ. Together we are linked by one divine network and activated by one single source.

The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part – the parts we mention and the parts we don't, the parts we see and the parts we don't. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt – and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance. Christ's church is a complete body. It's not all apostle, not all prophet, not all miracle worker, not all healer, not all pray-er. For only as you accept your part of that body does your part mean anything. We are Christ's **body** – that's who we are **together!** And don't forget it!

Let us pray: Lord, You have gifted each one of us with unique potential to do good – for our human family and especially for our spiritual family. We thank You for these gifts and abilities and talents, unique to each one of us. Let us never be jealous of gifts we don't have, but rather let us rejoice in who You have made us and dedicate our gifts to the general good of Your church. In the name of Jesus, we pray.

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