

We Won't. God Will.

A Sermon on 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ January 26, 2025

I am so glad to be with all of you on this day, the day of our Annual Meeting. I trust that when you are at St. Paul's you see at least a little bit of what I see. At St. Paul's I see people giving a genuine welcome to new members and to visitors. I see people serving the people God really needs us to serve, through their efforts and contributions to *The Open Pantry*, *Interfaith Works*, *The Samaritan Center*, the residents of the YMCA Senior Apartments, and through our developing partnership with *A Tiny Home for Good*.

At St. Paul's I see people working together, and not giving up in the face of many obstacles. I see people taking care of one another. At St. Paul's I see a community where people treat each other with respect and kindness, regardless of whether they have been present in the community for five minutes or five decades, regardless of our very different circumstances in life.

It doesn't seem to be this way in many places, including in many churches. This practice of treating each person with respect and kindness, regardless of their circumstances, does not come easily for many people. Sometimes it is challenging for us, here at St. Paul's, to treat each other with respect and kindness.

So we work together to build a culture of respect and kindness. We work to build a culture where people listen to one another and are patient with one another. We work to build relationships of trust with one another. We work to build a culture where people are not judging others harshly or dismissing the actions, words, and perspectives of others. This is our central task as followers of Jesus. This is our central task as a church. It's not an easy task for us, or for anyone, because all people, everywhere, have a tendency to turn away from God's way of doing things.

Paul's congregation in Corinth was failing miserably at the task of treating others with respect and kindness. For example, in 1 Corinthians 11 Paul observed that when the members gather for worship it is not really to share in the Lord's Supper. Paul observed that, even though they went through the motions of the worship service, such as bringing bread and wine to the communion table, reading from scripture, and saying the prayers, they were definitely not sharing in the Lord's Supper because they are not actually sharing at all. Some members were left out of their distribution of communion, while others drank so much wine they became drunk.

Paul could have simply told them to treat each other with kindness and respect, because that might appear to be his goal. Instead, Paul goes much further. He tells them why they should treat each other with kindness and respect. The members of the congregation are to treat each other with kindness and respect because they are all members of the Body of Christ. They shouldn't be dividing themselves into factions because, in fact, they are members of a single body, the Body of Christ.

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.

Paul's message built on Jesus' message. Jesus told his followers that they would be known as his disciples by their love for another. Paul told the early Christians that they must act as if they are the Body of Christ. Paul tells them that, as members of the Body of Christ, they are deeply connected with one another, as the hand is connected to the arm, and the foot is connected to the leg. This was a new, different idea for the Christians in Corinth, and it remains a very different idea for us.

We are to act as a single body, in order for God to accomplish God's work through us. *Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 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. 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.*

If we are to be the Body of Christ, it's essential for us to act in harmony with one another. We act in harmony when we act with respect for each other. We have different needs, different experiences, and different abilities. These differences are intentional. *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 God chose*

We have been arranged in this community, as a single body, the Body of Christ, by God, to carry out God's mission in the world. God created us with different gifts and gathered us together in one place because different gifts are required in order to accomplish God's work. Paul may have been the first person to articulate this message. We are all members of one body. We are to treat those who are weaker or less honorable with greater respect.

Paul's message is especially important for us to hear today. We are seeing and hearing a torrent disrespectful words and actions against immigrants, women, scientists, and many people who are public servants. We have witnessed the worst action of disrespect against police officers in our nation's history. Especially this week, we have seen and heard many actions and words of division and disrespect.

Paul's message has never been more important than today because there is only one path to healing the divisions and injuries of our nation. We are not going to fight our way out of our frightening circumstances. One of the reasons we remember a Christian pastor named Martin Luther King, Jr. with a holiday honoring his birthday is that, in a time as dangerous and frightening as ours, he helped Americans see they would not be able to fight their way out of the racism that divided our nation.

So the kindness and respect for others exhibited by the members of St. Paul's Church have never been more important than they are this week and this year. Our kindness and respect for one another are rooted in our understanding that God has brought us together in this place, as one body, in some way inseparable from one another. Kindness and respect are the outward manifestations of our spiritual identity as members of the Body of Christ. Kindness and respect are the greatest gift we bring to the world.

You might ask with disbelief in your voice, "How will the people of St. Paul's be able to heal the divisions and injuries of our nation, armed only with these simple, modest tools: respect and kindness?" The answer is simple, "We won't." We won't be able to heal the divisions. God will. God will heal our divisions if we let God accomplish God's work through us.

All of that kindness and respect we've been practicing has been for a purpose, and that purpose has never been more important than today. We are called to treat each other with love and respect. We are called to let God use our gifts for God's purposes, not for our purposes. We are called to treat one another as members of the Body of Christ.