You might have noticed that I am very glad to be your priest, here at St. Paul’s. That is because this congregation is full of great people doing great things. At St. Paul’s people almost always do the right things for the right reasons. People take care of one another. People welcome others to join groups and activities. In most cases at St. Paul’s, everyone who wants to be included is included. At St. Paul’s positions of responsibility, authority and decision making are not reserved for one group of people.

It doesn’t work that way in every church. Take Paul’s congregation in the city of Corinth, in ancient Greece. Paul gathered and led this congregation of Christ followers 15 years after the first Easter. When Paul left to start new congregations in other places, he wrote letters to them. We have portions or complete copies of three of these letters.

Paul’s letters to the Corinthians are valuable for us for three reasons. First, Paul provides the first words of guidance for us to live spiritually in and with Christ. Second, the city of Corinth was extremely diverse, in a way that is similar to the diversity of our community. Third, Paul’s letters to the Corinthians are valuable because we see Paul and the Corinthians struggling with the same issues we see in many churches today.

Chief among these is the issue of factionalism. In the chapters leading up to chapter 12 we pick up clues about some of the factions. There is a faction I call the ‘Super-Christians’. These are people we might think of as the spiritual athletes of the church. They think great thoughts and perform great deeds and are confident in their superiority.

A second group is what I call the ‘Semi-Romans’. These folks are joining in social events that include a healthy portion of the bar-b-que from the local Roman Temple, which more or less indicates they are participating in the Roman cultic practices.

The third group is a group we might call the swingers. They have interpreted Paul’s words about the freedom in Christ to give them the go-ahead for some extra freedom in the bedroom.

In the first ten chapters of the letter, Paul has specific warnings for each of these groups. But the overriding message of this letter, titled First Corinthians, is about the danger of factionalism and the necessity of unity. The factionalism of the congregation becomes completely apparent in their celebration of the Lord’s supper, during which some of the members break out a picnic reserved only for themselves and others don’t receive anything at all.

In chapter 11 Paul writes, When you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?

In chapter 11 Paul identifies the central issue: factions within the church. In chapter 12 Paul describes the church as a single, indivisible body. In chapter 13 Paul describes the most powerful gift we have as members of the body of Christ, which is love.

In our passage for today Paul describes the body of Christ, that is the church, as being comprised of a great variety of members, with a great variety of gifts. There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. Then Paul proceeds to describe a number of different gifts seen in this congregation.

For Paul, and for us, the variety of gifts is secondary. We give thanks for the varied gifts, but our varied gifts are not the ultimate goal. God is the ultimate goal. God is the source of our gifts. The essential movement is for us to be united in 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.

Each one of you has been given beautiful, varied gifts by God. When you share these gifts with others you share the power and goodness of God with the world. But there is a much greater gift than any of our individual gifts. The greatest gift is the gift of unity. The greatest power is the power of community formed as the body of Christ for the world.

We get preoccupied with our little, individual gifts. We are fascinated to investigate the specific types of gifts described by Paul in the first half of chapter 12. But Paul’s point is that the individual gifts are much less powerful than the ultimate gift of the church, which is the gift of unity. The church has the possibility to be one body, united in our diversity. Paul describes the individual gifts in three or four verses. Paul describes the power of the united body of Christ for the rest of chapter twelve, about 25 verses altogether.

The great power is the power of Holy Spirit working through a community. The great gift is the gift of unity. This is the gift which is sorely missing in America today. This is the power, the only power, that will heal the 400 year-old, gaping wound in our nation.

The wound has been there from the start. For a few years it might seem to be healing. It might seem that a scab is forming and the body is healing itself underneath. All it takes is one or two cowardly, fearful individuals, enthralled with their own power, to tear at the flesh of our nation and rend the wound open again. All it takes is one or two individuals, wielding the power of a bullet or a rock or a knee against the neck of a handcuffed man, and our nation is bleeding again.

We have been divided from one another. We are divided into factions. Sometimes we might not seem to notice. We might not notice the way we have been separated from one another. We might not notice the way one group of people always stays away from another group. We might not notice that one group of people is deeply fearful and another bunch of people is deeply angry and others must always take one precaution and another precaution and another.

It’s all because of that deep division, that wrenching wound. Today we feel the terrible hurt. Today we feel the injury. Today we feel the pain of the bloody gash in the body of our nation.

How will the wound be healed? How will the bleeding be stopped? How can we make the pain go away?

The pain will not go away until there is an end to the violence. The pain will not go away until the bleeding stops. The violence and the bleeding will not stop until we are healed.

We will not be healed by any sort of individual gifts, no matter how great. The wound will not be healed by the man with what Paul describes as the gift of wisdom. If Abraham Lincoln suddenly appeared before us and gave us the greatest gift of wisdom, the wound would not be healed. The wound will not be healed by the woman with what Paul describes as the gift of healing. If one thousand individuals with the powers of Mother Theresa suddenly appeared on the streets of Minneapolis and Atlanta and Louisville, the wound would not be healed.

Paul is right. All of the individual gifts are beside the point. The important thing about the individual gifts is that they are activated by the same Spirit.

There is a hope of healing the wound that grieves us today, and that hope comes from the Holy Spirit, which is the power of unity. It is not a power held by one individual or even by thousands of individuals. It is a power visible among us, only as a community, only as we behave as the body of Christ.

So we do our best to not get in the way. We try to rid our minds and our hearts and our mouths of the words and actions that will disrupt God’s work of unity. Knowing our weakness, we try to make a space for God’s spirit to work among us.

We pray for God’s spirit to work among us. We pray for the unity of our congregation. We pray that our congregation would create a place for God’s spirit of unity to begin the healing, somewhere along the edge of the enormous wound of our nation.