

ROMANS 12:3-8

19th Sunday After Pentecost, October 13 2020

Smith

All Members Belong to All the Others

3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. 4 For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. 6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; 7 if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; 8 if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

There are certain skills that each of us needs to learn: Walking, talking, reading, sharing, and following directions are among the most important. You might be skilled in doing math, in cooking, in organizing, in singing, in driving long distances without getting drowsy. Maybe you're skilled in listening. All of these things are gifts from God.

Paul reveals two gifts in our text that are the most important of all: grace, and faith. Grace isn't really a gift that God gives, but a blessed way God has of looking at us. Grace is the love that God has simply because God is loving, not because we are loveable. We love because someone or something is lovable, a food that tastes good, an animal that is a companion, a person who is kind, or who had helped, or who is attractive. But God does not love us because of who we are or what he sees in us or even because of our potential. God loves us merely because he is loving. That's grace: That's love we don't deserve.

Faith is our trust in God on account of that grace. The grace is in God and remains there. Faith is something he places in us that connects us to him. Faith is as lot like the IV tube you get in the hospital. It's through the tube that medicine or nourishment comes into our bodies. Well, faith is the tube or channel God gives to us so that his grace and his blessings can come into us, into my soul, into my mind, into my heart, and into my flesh. His forgiveness comes this way, too. So the faith we have is an all-important gift. Without faith we would be like a patient without the IV tube. The medicine is ready to come, but it has no way in. With faith, all of the medicine comes from God, as much as we need, as often as we need it.

Paul asks us to think about ourselves in that way: The unlovable who have been loved anyway by God. This kind of love is something that many of us never really think about. We want to think that God loves us because we're basically good, or because mom and dad were Christians, and because we try to act like Christians. But God's judgment in Genesis 6 of all mankind still stands today: "Every inclination of man's heart is always evil all the time." We're sinful because we were born sinful, and we don't overcome that stain of sin by choices that we make or by a pattern we live by. That sin has been overcome in us by Christ, by his blood shed on the cross. And now, forgiven children of God that we are, we've been brought into the body of the Church, the Body of Christ. And each one of us fills a role in that body, in God's church.

Where would the human body be if every organ was a mouth, or an eye? We wouldn't get much done; we wouldn't live very long. But because we have many organs, legs and arms and fingers, and a heart, lungs, liver, stomach, brain, ears, nose, and on and on, we have mobility, creativity, many skills, many abilities. We can protect ourselves, feed ourselves, clean ourselves, and put our hands together to pray.

Where would the church be if we were all exactly the same? We don't all have the same gifts, the same purposes in the church. If we were all great preachers, the church would never get cleaned. We would have nobody to teach Sunday School or count the offerings. Even between pastors there are different gifts, different specialties. And between lay people the variety of gifts is even bigger.

So each of us has a place in God's kingdom, and each of us fills a role in that kingdom right here, locally, in our church. It's harder to see that now, where many of us are watching worship at home, and we try to stay socially distanced from one another. But we still have a role to play, each one of us, in the kingdom.

But just as the foot belongs to the rest of the body, and the body can't function properly without the foot, so it is with the body of Christ. Paul tells us that we who are the body of Christ belong each other, we make up the body of the Church together, and if one of us stops functioning, the rest of us suffer the same way a body suffers when a part is hurt or in pain.

Now, Paul also warns each of us not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to. This is where false doctrine and false teaching come from. We Christians should act in love for the rest of the body of Christ. We won't try to puff ourselves up or take on a role that isn't ours unless we're asked to by the body. For example, the knee has a usual function, and most of us can't imagine the knee doing anything much besides bending, or being a thing we kneel on, and so forth. But once in a while, not even once a day, but once in a while, the arms are full and the hands run out of fingers to hold things with, and the body calls on the knee to hold a door open, and so the knee rises in its importance for a moment. But then it goes right back to being a knee, and it doesn't expect to receive applause for what it's done. And when a member of the body of Christ is called on to rise up for a moment, he or she should do their best and should do what they've been called on to so with humility and only in the service of Christ.

In verses 6-7, Paul lists four gifts in the church first: **Prophecy, serving, teaching, and encouraging.** When we think of prophecy today, we usually think of preaching, public preaching like I'm doing now, something I only do with the greatest fear, and only because you have called me to do it. I would not choose to stand in the pulpit, ever, apart from the call of the Holy Spirit through you, his church.

Serving is ministry in many different ways. Serving in the present day means meetings, phone calls, front door conversations, driving long distances, being thorough and precise when writing emails and letters, working with the Post Office for some ministries, wrestling with technologies, printers, copiers, laptops, pads, and more.

Teaching today means prepping questions and answers for Bible Studies but also providing useful illustrations, interesting and appropriate powerpoint slides, videos, and even music and maps, often at a moment's notice.

Encouraging means holding up the emotional and spiritual well-being of the church and all its members, beginning with your own family and friends. How are your children today? You see that the more you handle their encouragement, your service will free up other members, including your pastors, for other service.

Notice with these gifts that Paul says simply, if you have this gift, use it. With other gifts, he says do them as well as you can. If giving, give generously, and so on. But with some gifts, just be faithful.

We have to ask: What sin does this passage expose in my life? Well, knowing that God wants me to love the rest of the members of the church and to fulfill my role faithfully, then my sin is when I fail. This could be when one member rises up in a way that's not appropriate, or when a member who normally would be encouraging suddenly begins to criticize what the teachers or preachers are doing, or who tries to take over their role. But for most of us, it's that we stumble into sin in the usual ways in our lives. We let misunderstanding boil over into anger. We let fear turn into frustration or fury. We let want become covetous desire. Or we shirk our responsibilities as parents, as husbands or wives, or as workers in God's kingdom.

Our comfort over those sins runs all the way back to the first blessing: The grace of God. Remember that we saw how the grace of God isn't based on what we deserve? Isn't that amazing and wonderful, almost beyond belief? But believe it. The love of God through Jesus has saved us. He has taken that sin that weighs so heavily on your heart, and he has lifted it away.

There are times when you do laundry, and the stink of the dirty clothes is so bad you can hardly bear it when you put them into the washing machine. But the dash of soap, the cascade of water, and the agitation and the motion of the washing machine, followed by a good long drying in the other machine or out on the line or on the drying rack, and what was unbearable becomes fresh and delightful once again.

When God takes a whiff of us, he doesn't need to toss us into the washer. We've already been washed. The faith he gave to us at our baptism gives us a fresh, clean, delightful odor to God. We stand, we live, and we serve God constantly washed by the sacrifice of Jesus, by the agitation and pain he endured on our behalf.

God loves us despite our failures and our sins on account of Jesus. So through our faith in Jesus, he sends us his grace and every blessing so that we can serve him and serve one another as members of his Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints.

By grace, we belong to God forever. And now in his service, "All members belong to all the others."