

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
January 24, 2016  
Third Sunday after Epiphany  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Nehemiah 8:1-10  
Psalm 113  
I Corinthians 12:12-27  
Luke 4:14-21

I want to focus our attention again today on the epistle lesson, and the Apostle Paul's conversation about the church as the body of Christ.

Paul was not the first one to employ the metaphor of the body. In Greek and Roman society the body was used as a political metaphor, a way to show the populace of the importance of political unity and to warn them of the dangers of protest or sedition.

Paul employs the metaphor differently, using it to describe the unity in the church. And for Paul, unity in the church is not something that is imposed from without, *but is a gift of God through the Holy Spirit.*

Paul says that the church is a unique organism where none of its members functions independently. It is a dynamic fellowship where all persons are equally significant and celebrated. The church is a *living organism* where the trite cliché still applies: *we really do need each other.*

The church is a body so uniquely bound together by the Holy Spirit that when one member suffers, all share the pain. When one member reaches a

milestone, all share in the victory. We may be many in number. But we are one in the bond of the Holy Spirit.

This unity amidst great diversity creates a tenuous balance, one which we are admonished to nurture and preserve again and again in Scripture. For if that balance is lost, all suffer.

Paul's words here reminded me this week of Dizzy Dean. Dizzy Dean was one of the most colorful players ever to play professional baseball. He grew up the son of a poor sharecropper in Oklahoma. After a stint in the army, he was signed to a professional baseball contract with the St. Louis Cardinals organization in 1929.

In 1933, Dean won 20 games for the Cardinals and led the National League in strikeouts. In the first game of the 1933 season, he set a now-broken modern league record by striking out 17 batters in one game.

The following year Dean pitched the Cardinals to the pennant, winning 30 games and losing only 7. The Cardinals went on to win the World Series.

Then in 1937, Dizzy's career took a bizarre twist. While pitching in the All Star Game, a batter hit a line drive that hit Dizzy on the little toe of his left foot, fracturing it.

A few weeks later, Dean tried to pitch again with his foot wrapped in splints and an enlarged shoe. But the pain in his little toe forced him to compensate and to

adjust the way he delivered the ball. He was never the same again, and to many observers of the game, it was the undoing of his great career.

Brothers and sisters, it might just be possible to read the Apostle Paul's words here to the Corinthians through the lens of Dizzy Dean's bizarre injury and the decline of his career. We are one body in Jesus Christ. We are many parts playing different roles, but all are important and significant. When one part suffers or does not fulfill its role, the entire body is affected.

Now I can well imagine that some of you may be thinking, "Pastor, this is all well and good, but I'm just not convinced that what I have to offer is very significant to the church."

I understand how you feel. I think that each of us feels this way at one time or another. But if I hear Paul correctly, the issue is not whether you or I feel that our gifts are meaningful or significant. The issue is whether we are willing to humbly offer our gifts back to Jesus in service of his Church.

Anatole France's short story *The Juggler of Notre Dame* tells of a juggler who traveled through France in medieval times, plying his trade at fairs and other events. He would unroll his rug, lie on his back, and juggle various objects with his hands and feet.

He was very skilled and made a good living doing this. In time, though, he grew old and weary. He became ill and retired to a monastery to recover. Once he recovered, the monastery granted him permission to stay.

This particular monastery was dedicated to the service of Mary. Each monk brought before Mary gifts that represented their respective talents. These varied from illuminated manuscripts to offerings of flowers and fine-crafted works of art.

The juggler, however, had none of these things to bring. In the evenings, he would sit quietly before the altar in reverent but sad silence. Finally, in desperation, he resolved to offer Mary the only thing he knew he could do well. So, he began to sneak into the chapel late at night when no one else was around. He would unroll his rug, lie on his back, and juggle whatever objects were available.

One evening he was discovered by several of the monks. They were outraged at his sacrilegious actions. They went to gather all of the monks together so they could return and confront him. When they arrived back at the chapel, they were shocked by what they found. Mary had descended from her pedestal, and with a smile was wiping the sweat from the juggler's brow.

It can be easy to believe that our gifts are somehow less significant than others. Or we can be tempted to think that spiritual gifts consist primarily of those things that are done only when the church gathers for worship.

But such thinking is clearly misguided. It's possible for persons to use their gifts in ways that are largely unnoticed or unseen by the rest of the body. But the body would suffer if those gifts were removed or not used.

We are living in a society where all things have become dispensable -- even human beings. If you don't perform at your job or add value to your organization, you are dispensable and can be replaced.

*But not in the church. Not among God's people. Not in the body of the living Christ.* For even as the Holy Spirit anointed Jesus to preach the Gospel and to bring the Kingdom of God to earth, the church is anointed by the Spirit so that we may be an extension of Jesus and continue his work in the world.

We are now his hands, his feet, and his voice. We are many, but we are one, because we have been baptized by the same Spirit into his body. We are not one because I stand up here and preach a sermon and try to encourage everybody to "all get along." We are one because God has made us one, and to live any other way is to reject his call on our lives.

As we come to the Table this morning, I remind you of who you are. You were made by God on purpose, for a purpose. You are a conduit. God has love he wants to give to others through you. God has lives he wants to bless and touch -- through you! You are indispensable!

So come with joy. Come with joy, and then rise up to take your place in the work that God is doing.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.