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Romans 12:1-8

Belonging to Each Other: Our Gifts

Two weeks ago I shared words from Romans chapter 8, beloved words that remind us that nothing can separate us from the love of God. We belong to God. We have been claimed by God and that claim on our lives pushes us outward, not inward. We have been assured that we are chosen, and because of that assurance, we are called to be Christ to others. Our text this morning amplifies that message by reminding us that way the church become Christ to the world is by each of us sharing our unique gifts to become one body. Hear now these words from Romans chapter 12, verses 1-8. The apostle Paul says,...

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

The apostle Paul had never visited the church in Rome. Instead of opening his letter with personal greetings like he does in his other letters, he opens by saying, "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul goes onto tell them that he longs to see them, so that they may be strengthened – or rather that he and those in the church of Rome may be mutually encouraged by each other's strength.

While Paul may not have personally known those to whom he was writing, Paul knew them. He knew that the church – really that any group of gathered people – needed to figure out some way of organizing themselves for the task at hand, some way to see themselves. They had a model close at hand – that of the Roman Empire. For men the Empire was defined by rigid hierarchies based on heredity, property, wealth, citizenship and freedom. For women it was based on the status of their fathers and husbands. Boundaries between the different classes

were strict, and members of different classes even dressed differently – legally enforced. There was a complicated system of patronage that also influenced your place in society.¹

And Paul says to church in Rome, “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Do not be conformed...be transformed. Paul goes on to describe a model of a society not based on birthright, not with an emphasis on holding on to your rank or trying to achieve the next rung up on the ladder, rather a body where we belong to each other and it is the combination of our gifts that makes the collective function. Imagine how radical this must have sounded to Roman ears: “...we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.” Members of one another. We belong to each other. In a world where rigid demarcations were enforced- legally enforced- this concept would have been as alien as participating in a worship service through an internet livestream.

Because Paul knew that this concept of the church like a body – with all of the parts needed to make a whole - was such an abstract concept to them, he delineated what he meant with concrete examples. Prophecy – speaking truth to power; serving others, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading and compassion. Sometimes we see these lists in scripture and our eye glaze a bit and we aren't sure how that all works in making us the body of Christ. I love this real world example from a spiritual gifts curriculum written by Presbyterian pastor Lynne Baab for the *Thoughtful Christian*.²

The exercise goes something like this. I am going to tell you a story about what happened at fellowship time one day. A child carrying a cup of juice runs across the fellowship hall, trips on a wrinkle in the carpet, and falls down. Imagine seven people are close by, each with one of the gifts listed in Romans 12. What would each of them do?

- The server would be likely to clean up the spilled juice.
- The compassionate person would probably sit down by the child, perhaps hold their hand, and comfort them.
- The teacher would be likely to say something like, “In the future, maybe you could put the cup down before you run.”
- The encourager would probably want to say something like, “Let me help you up.”
- The leader might be standing back considering what it would take to fix the carpet.
- The giver might go get the child another cup of juice.
- The prophet or perceiver would likely see things others weren't seeing. They might have noticed the argument with other children that caused the child to run. They might pick up on the insecurity of the child.

¹ The Social Order of the Roman Empire. <https://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/order.html>

² Lynne M. Baab. Appreciating Spiritual Gifts. Session 2. *Thoughtful Christian*. 2007
www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com

What I love about this exercise is that, on their own, each of these responses is completely appropriate. And any single one may have helped the situation. And yet to really make the child and the church whole, all of the gifts are needed. Each one added something unique, so that at the end the child was soothed and there was a plan to prevent the spill from happening again.

The apostle Paul thinks the recognition of the unique gifts we bring is so important to the mission of being the church, that he addresses it three times in scripture. We have heard the list this morning from Romans. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul lists wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues. And in Ephesians chapter 4, he lists the gifts by the roles in ministry to which they lead: apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists, and pastors. Putting them all together, Paul's lists seem pretty exhaustive. However, the apostle Peter throws in one more in 1 Peter 4 – the gift of hospitality. As a pastor, I recognize this may be one of the most important in the life of the church. I remember talking with members of my former congregation as we were reinstating in person services during the COVID pandemic. Everyone was so happy to be back together, worshipping in person. I asked people what they missed the most. The most common answer was not hearing the sermon preached live or praying together or even singing together. No, it was the cookies at coffee hour and catching up with each other's lives. Maybe Paul took that for granted, but I am grateful Peter named hospitality as a spiritual gift- a gift, I might add that is alive and well in this congregation!

I mentioned a few minutes ago that sometimes we see these lists in scripture and our eye glaze a bit and we aren't sure how that all works in making us the body of Christ. And I also think sometimes we see these lists in scripture and think that we each have to have all of these gifts – that each of us needs to be a teacher and a giver and pastor and a leader and an encourager and... all of the time. Yes – we likely have all of these attributes and can act and contribute to the church through multiple mechanisms. And yet Paul wants us to recognize that we become one body, when we who are many become members of one another. When we recognize that because we each belong to Christ, we each belong to each other. And that means we don't have to do all - and be all - by our self.

This notion is as countercultural in our society today as it was to the church in Rome when Paul described a model of a society that was not based on hierarchy with the emperor at the top, and your lineage as the defining criteria for your spot in the order. While this type of hierarchy does exist to some extent today, we also exist in a world where we are expected to be everything to everyone. And look good doing it on social media.

This past week I read the book *What Made Maddy Run? The Secret Struggles and Tragic Death of an All-American Teen*. I was given the book a number of years ago, and I never got around to reading it until this week. It tells the story of Maddy Holleran, a freshman at the Univ. of Pennsylvania who died by suicide in 2014. Maddy appeared to have the "perfect life" or at least that was what she projected on Instagram. She was a top student, had lots of friends and

was an elite athlete, running track and cross-country at Penn. There are many themes in the book that are compelling – the desire to achieve, to live up to the expectations others set, and that you yourself set, the “curated” picture-perfect life we too often share with others, especially on social media; the difficulty in sharing challenges in our life, especially mental health challenges with each other. Yet with all of these important issues addressed in the book, there was one that particularly stood out to me this week. It was a discussion about Maddy’s switch from competing in soccer to competing in track as she transitioned from high school to college.

Maddy was a star soccer player, co-captain of her high school team that went undefeated two seasons in a row, winning the New Jersey State Championships. Running was an adjunct to soccer for her – a way for her to stay in shape between seasons. And she enjoyed the progress she made, getting faster and faster, eventually winning a state championship in the 800-meters in her senior year of high school. Maddy got so good that she was recruited by the Univ. of Pennsylvania. She rescinded a verbal commitment to play soccer at Lehigh, a good school, but not the Ivy League, in order to run at Penn. The book chronicles the complexities she faced in her transition to college, with meticulous detail from her family, friends, her text messages, emails, social media feeds, and notes on her computer. The author, Kate Fagan, writes, “For all of Madison's life, late summer and fall had meant soccer. It meant walking onto a grass field, cleats in hand, laughing with friends she'd known her entire life. The work was hard, but it was collective work, with friends to connect with between sprints with a nod ("We got this"), or a laugh ("Coach is crazy"), or an exhausted grimace ("How many more?") --each person pulling weight toward a larger goal. Now, late summer and fall meant waking up at dawn in a cramped dormitory room, in a new city, to trudge to practice and run long distances, the person next to you living inside her own head, considering her own times, responsible only for her own motivation. Maddy didn't have anyone she wanted to show up for.”³

“Maddy didn't have anyone she wanted to show up for.” I think Paul would get this. “So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.” Paul’s claim that we belong to God and that we belong to each other means that we are not complete without each other. The body of Christ is not whole unless we each bring ourselves to the table. In a few minutes we will gather at the Table to be fed the bread of life and drink from the cup of grace and salvation. Christ invited us all to dine with him. Christ recognized that as much as we need him, we also need each other. Christ gave each of us unique gifts so that we would recognize the degree to which we need each other. We need each other to be Christ’s whole body here on earth and bring the kingdom of God just a little bit closer to reality. May it be so. Join me in prayer.

³ Kate Fagan. *What Made Maddy Run? The Secret Struggles and Tragic Death of an All-American Teen*. Little, Brown and Company, 2017.p65; a synopsis of the book, including this quote can be found at https://www.espn.com/espnw/culture/story/_/id/20175159/exclusive-book-excerpt-made-maddy-run-kate-fagan