

**Third Sunday after the Epiphany – January 21, 2007
Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV
First Corinthians 12:12-27 “One Body”**

The Rev. Kent Higgins

From the Epistle: *“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”*

Preaching on one of Saint Paul’s letters is one of those “good news, bad news” opportunities. On the one hand, Paul’s writings are believed to be among the very earliest in the church, pre-dated, at least with respect to the present Canon of Scripture, only by the Gospel of Mark. On the other hand, it is Paul who writes that “...women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says.³⁵ If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.”¹

And of course Paul, at least in English translation, is famous for run-on sentences, which have thoughts within thoughts, which twist and turn, and which seem to continue forever with their meaning not clear until you reach the last word.

With all that said, this is too good an opportunity to pass up.

Two Sundays ago, when last I was with you, I spoke of baptismal ministry and how impressed I am with you, and the way in which you have taken upon yourselves the doing of what needs to be done. Today’s Epistle gives me the

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. 1 Co 14:34

opportunity to focus on the advice Saint Paul gave to the church in Corinth, and to raise some “caution flags” for your consideration.

Frankly, all of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians is useful reading for anyone embarking on building up the church. Paul’s experiences and suggestions apply to the church in Hinton – or anywhere else, for that matter.

Remember that Paul speaks of the church’s being the “Body of Christ,” and we are members of that body. This incorporation in a larger entity has ethical implications, among them:

The Christian does not own his or her body (which is another way of saying his or her own resources), but holds them in trust for the larger body. What we have we were given by God.

The Christian should make decisions on the basis of the entire Church and not merely his or her own self-interests; and

The Christian must manifest full solidarity with the other members in both joy and sadness,² at those times when you like one another and those times when you do not; and finally,

The Christian is responsible for using the gifts he or she has been given to lift up the entire body.

My friends, that’s a load of responsibility!

When Paul was writing to the people in Corinth, he was trying to reconcile groups within the growing church who saw things in different ways. I don’t know

² Based on Freedman, David Noel: *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York : Doubleday, 1996, c1992, S. 1:1147

if today you believe that all of the members of Ascension Episcopal Church feel the same way about the issues that face the church, but I would be very surprised if you do. Given that truth, you should expect some friction among yourselves. If you expect it, you will be better prepared to deal with it.

As you develop and implement a plan, it is almost inevitable that some people will lead in some areas and others will follow or assist them. That pretty much means that jealousies will develop.

Please don't misunderstand what I'm trying to convey to you. I don't think any of you intends for these things to happen. All I'm doing is applying the lessons Saint Paul learned in working with the church in Corinth. (And I'm not trying to compare myself to Saint Paul!)

But it is true of you, the people of Ascension Church, just as it was true of the people in the Corinthian church, that there are talented and gifted people in the group. Don't be surprised when the day comes that you have conflict with one another. Expect there to be a day when one or more of you thinks you are being asked to do too much. Expect a time when you know that someone else in the church is doing too little.

I suggest that you plan to be annoyed with the clergy. Father Adeeb or I will get on your nerves. The bishop will do something – or not do something – that will upset you. Some unexpected financial need will arise. Someone who has been contributing a significant amount of money will be unable to do so.

These are all perfectly normal events in our lives in general, but especially so in the life of the Church. And I understand, as I know you do, that there are parts of your lives that exist for all intents and purposes completely outside the experience of your church community.

I experience routinely the conflict between the needs of my day job and the needs of my ministry, and I've only been ordained for a month!

By no means am I trying to discourage anyone. Quite the contrary: I seek to encourage you by pointing out that what Saint Paul said to the people at Corinth is valid here today in Hinton.

Some of you will recall my saying that I try to prepare sermons at least a couple of weeks in advance. I wrestled with the Gospel lesson for today for the better part of a week, and I finally sat back and admitted that I did not see how to preach it.

And then I remembered a lesson another preacher shared with me. I'm not obligated to preach from the Gospel lesson appointed for the day, but I am required to preach the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And that's when I took a look with fresh eyes at the Epistle, and that led to this sermon.

In the context of what I have said today about what faces us, let me read you just a bit from the twelfth chapter of the First Letter to the Corinthians, and see if you hear that "good news":

“¹² For 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. ¹³ 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.”³

And then, “God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the

³ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. 1 Co 12:12

members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”⁴

We have nothing to fear if we put our trust in God to lead us in the right way. If we decide to do things without inviting God into the equation, we will fail; but I don't expect that to happen. Based on what I have seen, you will continue to look out for one another, loving your neighbor as yourself.

Last week, I was in a small church⁵ near Pittsburgh, and it reminded me in many ways of this church. At each service, they offer a “prayer for the parish,” and I'd like to pray it with you now. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, you have banished all fear through the resurrection of your son, Jesus Christ. Grant us the courage to overcome all our fears. Help us to risk ourselves for others. And strengthen our ministry to those in need, that we may be your faithful witnesses in this community. We ask for the sake of your son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

⁴ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version.* Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. 1 Co 12:24

⁵ St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Homestead.