

Sermon Finance Campaign Week 2 November 12, 2017

And so, dear sisters and brothers, I plead with you to give your bodies to God. Let them be a living sacrifice, holy - the kind the Lord can accept. When you think of what Christ has done for you, is this too much to ask? Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but be a new and different person with a fresh newness in all you do and think. Then you will learn from your own experience how his ways will really satisfy you.

As God's messenger I give each of you God's warning: Be honest in your estimate of yourselves, measuring your value by how much faith God has given you. Just as there are many parts to our bodies, so it is with Christ's body. We are all parts of it, and it takes every one of us to make it complete, for we each have different work to do. So we belong to each other, and each needs all the others.

God has given each of us the ability to do certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, then prophesy whenever you can - as often as your faith is strong enough to receive a message from God. If your gift is that of serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, do a good job of teaching. If you are a preacher, see to it that your sermons are strong and helpful. If God has given you money, be generous in helping others with it. If God has given you administrative ability and put you in charge of the work of others, take the responsibility seriously. Those who offer comfort to the sorrowing should do so with Christian cheer.

Don't just pretend that you love others: really love them. Hate what is wrong. Stand on the side of the good. Love each other with true affection and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy in your work, but serve the Lord enthusiastically. Romans 12:1-11

We're celebrating Veteran's Day this weekend, and I'd like to invite everyone who has served in the armed forces to stand so that we can acknowledge and thank you for your service and your sacrifice. The church has a lesson to learn from the military service: that of working together as a single, united, conformed body, following a commander. The Apostle Paul has written about being one body, the Body of Christ, with an emphasis that we belong to each other, and need each other, all of our gifts working together to glorify God and bless us.

Last Friday the United Methodist pastors in this area (called the Mt. Diablo Circuit because we all serve churches around Mt. Diablo) met with our District Superintendent,

Schuyler Rhodes. Some of you got to hear Schuyler preach at our yearly church conference a week ago. Schuyler describes himself as “a professional optimist” and at the circuit meeting he challenged us pastors to lead churches that are positive instead of negative, hopeful instead of cynical, and united rather than fractured. Schuyler asked us to look at the divisions in the culture that surrounds us and to remember that as the Body of Christ we are to be united as one Body. I did look at the warring factions in American culture, and in the world, and at people I know who don't give to the Salvation Army anymore because of its conservative theology, or who don't support the Boy Scouts because of their earlier stand on gay leaders. I have my own list, which I hadn't thought of as splinters, but because of theological differences I've boycotted places like Chick-fil-A and Hobby Lobby. Schuyler reminded us that as Christians our mission is to seek (not to force, but seek) unity in Christ, regardless of our differences.

In this letter Paul wrote to the Romans he said, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world...” and Schuyler echoed Paul's reminder to focus - not on what divides - us but on Who (Christ Himself) unites us. I thought about Tom Henderson saying that we can have differences and still love each other as the Body of Christ. Actually Tom's expression was a little more poetic and pithy, “We can disagree without being disagreeable.” Schuyler challenged us, pastors and congregations in the Mt. Diablo Circuit, to find ways as the church to stay in unity and in love with each other, regardless of our disagreements. Culturally there is no support for unity and love. But Jesus calls us to “not conform to the pattern of this world.”

Sometimes it seems to me that the Christian life is a stretch of open road, and then sometimes - like the challenge to be united in Christ regardless of our differences -

then sometimes the Christian journey seems like driving up Filbert Street (the steepest street in San Francisco) in a stick-shift, which takes real effort and attention in order to keep climbing upward, and not stalling and sliding backward. Focusing on unity in Christ, all of us working together, using our Holy Spirit-given gifts for the common good, takes effort, trust, prayer, and each of us being immersed in the love of Jesus. The reward for being united in Christ is glimpses of the coming Kingdom of God.

Last week in worship, and then again at Wednesday night's Church Council, we read Paul's letter to the church at Corinth; and his encouragement to discover, and use our charisms, our Holy Spirit-given gifts. If you've been told by parents or teachers or siblings, not to think too much of yourself, or that you aren't good enough, then it can be hard to see your own charisms. It might help to ask a friend, a sister or brother in Christ, what spiritual gifts they see in you. Last week I likened charisms to "horcruxes" in the Harry Potter series - charisms are expressions or features of God hidden in each of us to be discovered and used and enjoyed... to reveal God, to bless others, and to help heal the world. Paul insists, in his letter to the Corinthians, and in this letter to the Romans, that everyone has been given charisms, Holy Spirit-given gifts. It's counter-culture to name and claim our giftedness - that we each contain divinely given "pieces" of God - and it might be tempting to dismiss it as being "a first century Christian thing" or "too Pentecostal" to believe that we are given spiritual gifts.... for the common good, for the healing of the world, and to witness the Resurrected Christ in our midst.

In his letter to the Corinthians Paul has a list of some of the charisms, and in this letter to the church at Rome he lists more: serving, teaching, preaching, generous giving, administration, and compassion. This isn't a complete list of charisms or Holy

Spirit-given gifts. This scripture we heard this morning is bookended by two of Paul's strongest points about the Christian life. He starts with the admonishment that we're not to be conformed to the culture around us... fractured and divided, angry and cynical... and he ends with what identifies us as followers of Jesus. There is a the spiritual gift Paul always comes back to as the one most to be desired. There was fighting, dissension, and splintering in the early churches about which spiritual gifts were the most important. Times have changed, and the arguments might have changed, but human nature is the same, and Paul's counsel to the early churches applies to us here, today. We might not give voice this, but almost all of us are certain that our opinions are the same as Jesus' opinions, and in a disagreement, He would side with us. This isn't the "my gift is holier than your gift" argument that Paul saw and addressed with those churches, but it has the same splintered results: disagreements that lead to divisions.

Paul listed some of Holy Spirit gifts, given to Jesus' followers, to build up the church and bless the world. And then he identified the hallmark - the one identifying mark - of a Christian, and the most desired gift: love. Loving each other with the love of Christ is like driving up Filbert Street in San Francisco in a stick-shift. Loving others with the tenderness, compassion, humility, and grace Jesus offers us, is like being a new driver in a stick-shift. It's a practice, and "sticking with it" (pardon the pun), eventually it becomes smooth and fun and feels like second-nature. Christian love is also a practice, and the first 90 years behind the wheel are the hardest. The first 64 years have been hard for me, with lots of stalling and jerky forward movement and some sliding backwards. I keep practicing because ~ I love Jesus and He has said that how I show

my love for Him, is by how I love others. As your pastor, I apologize if my attempts to love you with the love of Jesus, has caused some whiplash.

As challenging as the Christian life is, I can't imagine life without Christ, without the Christian community. On Friday, at the pastor's circuit meeting, Schuyler reminded us what a life without Jesus looks like. And it's all around us: division, dissension, brokenness, and warring. Paul's letter tells us the antidote to the splintering of the Christian community and the human family. We're to see and appreciate the Holy Spirit-given gifts each of us has; we're to see ourselves moving and working together as one body, the Body of the Resurrected Christ. We're to understand that we are all an indispensable part of His Body. This is a radical thought and it's the Apostle Paul's challenge: that how we love each other and find ways to work together, reveals God, blesses us, and those outside the Christian community, and helps heal the world. This is amazing and wonderful work the Holy Spirit has given us to do!

November is our Finance Campaign, and we are challenged to see our financial giving as a charism, a spiritual gift. Paul wrote to the church: "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Our spiritual worship is to offer our whole selves - our hearts, our minds, our feelings, our preferences, and our bank accounts - to Jesus. We are challenged to be a living sacrifice, to put Jesus and His Kingdom first in our lives, so that He can be known in others' lives. Being a living sacrifice includes living more simply so that others can experience that abundant life Jesus has promised to everyone. Being a living sacrifice includes, as Schuyler Rhodes said, being positive instead of negative, being hopeful instead of cynical, being united in

Christ instead of divided because of our differences. We are the gifted and creative and blessed Body of Christ, and may our living, and our giving, reveal Him to this broken world, so in need of Jesus. Amen.