

Some chapters in the bible, are well known because they speak to specific things. Genesis 1 is the creation story. Psalm 23 is comforting at funeral services. Luke 2 is our Christmas story. Romans 6 was important for Luther and justification by grace through faith.

First Corinthians 12, our epistle lesson this morning, is another one of those important chapters, it talks about spiritual gifts and the body of Christ.

The Apostle Paul is writing to the congregation at Corinth because there are all kinds of bad things happening there. Corinth is on a trade route and a hub for all kinds of traveling mischief. People are coming and going, people are wheeling and dealing, rich people and poor people, all kinds of immorality... And lot and lots of conflict! People are fighting and everyone wants to have their own way!

There is a very specific theological struggle happening in Corinth. As Lutherans we have a tradition of talking about Law and Gospel, and how important it is to keep these two in balance.

The law is important because it gives us a recipe for living. Generally speaking, if we follow the law, things go well for us. If we obey the traffic laws, we have fewer accidents. The law is for our protection from harm and danger. It's never a guarantee that things will go well, it just increases our chances that it will.

And of course, the gospel is the good news that God will not judge us by well we followed the law. God does not love us if we are good, God loves us because God is good. In other words, our righteousness is not dependent on how well behaved we are.

In fact, we are all in bondage to sin, all righteousness belongs to God. And through Jesus, through the crucifixion and resurrection we are forgiven. Our relationship with God is secure, and we have freedom from judgment under the law.

When law and gospel are in balance, we live responsibly to each other, we are accountable to each other to follow the laws so it goes well for all of us, and we are thankful for the freedom that God will not judge us when we fail.

The problem in Corinth, is that people in the congregation are exercising their freedom in the gospel as a way to justify hurting one another. Essentially, they are saying, "It's alright if I sin against you, God will forgive me..." Do you see how that can be a problem? Too much freedom, and not enough law is a formula for conflict.

When Paul writes to the congregations in Galatia, they have the opposite problem. Too much law and not enough Gospel. They were still trying to behave under the law, as though their salvation depended on it.

And this leads to fear of God, and the continuous finger pointing and judging of one another. Which is of course another formula for conflict. Healthy communities, healthy churches, keep law and gospel in balance.

One of the problems in Corinth is that the communion practices got out of hand. Parishioners brought their own bread and wine to the services. The rich brought very fine bread and the most expensive wine. And unfortunately, too much of it. Some poor couldn't even afford to bring any wine. Many people thought communion was disrespectful and insensitive. And everybody was fighting about it. And this situation was intolerable for Paul.

Paul addresses this situation by using the imagery and the metaphor of the Body of Christ. Which is our Epistle lesson this morning. It is the idea that we all belong to the one body of Christ. We are all different from one another, we all have different skills and abilities, we all come from different nationalities; red and yellow black and white.

We all think differently, some are republicans and some are democrats. We all behave differently, some follow the law better than others... But the one thing we all have in common is Jesus.

Jesus is the unity amidst all the differences. And the text is very clear that the differences, or the diversity, is for the wellbeing of the whole. In other words, the differences are not bad, the differences are intentional and good. The differences are for our benefit.

This past week there was an internet video that went viral showing an Elderly Native American man beating a drum and was surrounded by young boys that appeared to be mocking him. I have no idea how or why or what each group was doing, but the resulting national conversation became a spectacle to itself.

News media jumped on the story and everybody had opinions about it. On Facebook, people were getting very worked up. Some thought the young boys didn't do anything wrong, some thought the Elderly Native American was disrespected. The whole episode highlighted the cultural divide that exists in our country.

And that's not news. We all pretty much know we think differently from one another. We have different values. And we know that leads to conflict in our country, in our community, in our church, in our families...

And so, as Christians, what are supposed to do about it? Should we blame it on the non-Christians? There are a lot of Christian groups that do that... And of course, Christians are sinners too, and sometimes we can't help ourselves and we jump into the fray and blame other Christians... Like the Corinthians...

It's one thing to experience the pain and suffering of one individual, it's completely another thing to behold the pain and suffering of a crowd; a whole community. Christianity is for

individuals and it is also for communities. The Kingdom of God has enormous social and relational significance.

Perhaps the best expression of the Kingdom of God is found exactly in community. It's about learning how to live together. It's about being different people, having different opinions and ideas, and instead of tearing one another apart, we learn to listen and value the differences.

One of the greatest gifts we can give each another is to listen to one another, and listen so deeply that we change because of what we hear. And I'm not talking about changing our opinions, but our hearts.

When we listen deeply to one another, we know each other's stories; we come to love one another. And it's hard to hate and be afraid of people we love... Being the church means to love your neighbor as yourself.

In fact, one sign of being a church, is living as a reconciled group of people and with differences. And we are for the sake of the world. While the world out there is content with being scandalized with each other and fighting with each other. We are a different kind of community. It's about confessing our bondage to sin, listening, reconciling with one another, forgiving and loving each other.

Healthy church is rooted in knowing who our shepherd is, and it's not this person or that person, it's Jesus, Jesus, Jesus... It's always Jesus.

Quick story... Many years ago, I had a parishioner in Austin, Janet, who was a school teacher who never married, she was so loving, kind and gracious... She grew up in South Dakota, and proud of her family. Her dad had an expression that he used often, and it embarrassed her when she was young, especially when her friends were around.

Her dad would say, “Always keep your eyes on Jesus.” Janet said when she was young, she would roll her eyes. But as she grew older, that little saying became more and more important; and it became her own. Every time I visited, and just as we were saying goodbye, she would say, “Always keep your eyes on Jesus.”

And that’s what’s happening at Cannon River and Cross of Christ, we are keeping our eyes on Jesus. We are the body of Christ.

So, back to that question I asked earlier, what are we supposed to do when the world out there is warring with each other? Are we supposed to get in the middle of it, choose up sides and start fighting? Believe me, it sure is tempting...

How about if we remember we are all in the body of Christ, different from one another. And start listening to each other, and listening so deeply we start to change. So that we love one another. So, we become signs of reconciliation, and for the sake of the world.

God intended for us to be different, God intended for us to be the body of Christ. We are to show the world there is a different way. They will know we are Christians by our love.

And we are doing that. When a church functions as a Body of Christ, mission happens... It’s as simple as that. Love spills over in abundance.

Look at the annual reports of both congregations. My goodness, significant money and efforts for mission work. Good Samaritan Fund, Hope coalition, Feed My Starving Children, Holiday projects, blood drives, Gabby, Ruth’s kids... Look at those reports and feel proud of what’s been done.

We are making a difference in the world. We are the result of being the body of Christ. We are the signs of the Kingdom of God. We are communities of faithful people, transformed and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Miracles happen here, it's a sign...

Listen to one another, particularly people who are different than you. Listen deeply with your heart. And little by little, the Kingdom Comes... All together we are one flock... and Christ is indeed the unity amidst all our differences...

Let's all keep our eyes on Jesus... Amen