

“The Common Good”

1 Corinthians 12

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A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

One of my favorite movies is “Lincoln” which came out a few years ago in theaters, before the pandemic hit! The movie “Lincoln” is based, in part, on the book by Doris Kearnes Goodwin, “A Team of Rivals”. During the Civil War, Lincoln refused to label the people of the North and South the “good guys” and the “bad guys”, a split which Lincoln believed would have taken us closer to the national version of suicide. Instead, in his second inaugural address, delivered on March 4, 1865, one month before the end of the Civil War, Lincoln appealed for “malice toward none” and “charity for all.” That seems like an appropriate mantra for today’s culture! In his appeal to a deeply divided America, Lincoln points to an essential fact of our life together: if we are to survive and thrive, we must hold our divisions and contradictions with compassion, lest we lose our democracy.

I had an experience some years ago which demonstrates just how divided we are as a nation in our own time. I was having dinner with some friends at a local restaurant not long after the tragic mass shooting at a high school in Florida where many students and staff lost their lives – we have lost too many of our children and teens to gun violence! As I was eating my dinner and engaged in conversation about how we might address the issue the gun violence which is gripping our country, a man approached our table, uninvited, and began to argue with us, red faced and telling us that he overheard our conversation and we were simply wrong about our facts. I finally, as calmly as I could, reminded him that our country was committed to the notion of the common good and each of us

has the freedom to exercise our conscience. He was confrontational and aggressive and not the least bit sorry that he was interrupting our dinner and conversation. I was shocked that a complete stranger could make assumptions about our conversation and step so aggressively into our space. His entire witness was to his rights as an individual. I left dinner that night thinking, whatever happened to civility, rational conversation and the common good?

President Lincoln, and other leaders throughout history, including Jesus and the Apostle Paul, have much to teach us about embracing political diversity, and the tension that diversity creates, in a way that opens our hearts to each other, no matter how deep our differences. Parker Palmer, in his book “Healing the Heart of Democracy”, says that rage is simply one of the masks that heartbreak wears. We rage when we hurt or are afraid. When our individual and public conversations are partisan and polarizing, we lose the human connections of empathy, accountability, civility, and a healthy respect for the diversity on which our nation, our community, our church depends.

Let’s consider what Paul has to say about the common good.

To set the context: Paul helped to establish the church in Corinth while he was on one of his missionary journeys. Corinth was a prosperous commercial city located at the crossroads between east and west; on the cutting edge of culture. It was a city proud of its progressive thinking and fond of athletic festivals – they hosted the second largest competitive games – the Olympics being the largest – drawing huge crowds from faraway places. Corinth was religiously diverse; there was a large Jewish community in Corinth, residing alongside many other pagan religions. So, they were an urban group seeking purpose and meaning for life. Predominantly highly educated and embracing philosophical thought. After establishing the church in Corinth, Paul continues his journey. While he is in Ephesus, some 18 months after leaving Corinth, he receives word that the

Corinthians are divided. Apparently, a charismatic preacher has rolled into town by the name of Apollos. His teachings are different than Paul's, and so divisions are created between those who would follow Paul and those who would follow Apollos. To address this division and the swirling conflict pertaining to various particular issues, Paul writes to the Corinthians. He begins his letter by reminding them that the head of the church is always Jesus Christ. Not Paul. Not Apollos. Jesus Christ.

Prayer for Understanding:

Read 1 Corinthians 12

This morning, using Paul's letter to the Corinthians, I would like to imagine that the Apostle Paul is writing to us today here in Greenville.

Let's open Paul's mail to us now.

Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the will of God.

To the church in Greenville, NC, to those called to be saints, together with those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I call you saints because you all, each one of you, have been likewise called by God to be a member of the body of Christ, the church, because each of you have gifts to bring for the strengthening of the whole body. (By the way, you don't go to church, you are the church.) I understand that the word "saint" has come to mean something very different in your day. You believe saints to be people who are more likely to be venerated than imitated. People like Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena. People who have reached some level of moral perfection, who have sacrificed their very lives, at times, for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But the saints were not perfect people. They were

people who tried to witness to Jesus Christ in their own particular contexts; they reflected the grace and love of Jesus Christ in the manner in which they lived and spoke. You are also called to do the same, as followers of Jesus Christ. You are called by God to embody the gospel of love and grace, not because you are morally superior to the rest of the world, but because you have been chosen to serve the one who has called you. So, to you who are saints, and who stand with those saints who have gone before you and who will come after you, greetings.

The threat to the gospel is just as real in your day as it was in the early church. Oh, maybe you are not in danger of losing your physical lives, but there is a threat of losing your spiritual lives, losing direction, forgetting what it means to live in community. Forgetting what it means to be the Church of Jesus Christ. And I want to address several of those threats.

I remind you that it is Christ Jesus who creates and governs the church. It is not your church – it is Christ's church. You are entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ. What would Jesus say about the decisions you make or what you say or how you act toward one another and toward the strangers in your community? In the words of one of your contemporary theologians, Shirley Guthrie, "the church is not a voluntary association of believers who get together and decide to form a church. It is God who creates the church and calls people into it. The church, therefore, is not like a club or group of like-minded people who enjoy each other's company, form an organization for their mutual benefit and enjoyment, and set up a constitution, rules of membership, and policies and goals to suit themselves." It is not your church, but Christ's church, created and instituted to do the work of Jesus Christ in your particular contexts

There is a reason God calls you into the church. It is impossible for you to be autonomous and self-sufficient. You need a community of people to surround you, challenge you, support you, nurture you, guide you, and, at times lift you up

when you stumble, as you journey in faith. To be a Christian means that you belong to a community of faith, just as the leg or arm, foot or hand are members of the body. To be a Christian is to enter into a relationship not only with your Lord, but also with each other. When you tear each other down as you seek to promote your agenda to the detriment of other people, you are hurting the body. When you fail to listen to each other and seek the common good, remembering that it is Jesus Christ who is the head of the church, you hurt the body.

Your survival as a church, as a community, as a nation, depends not on your sameness, but on your diversity. Just as it is true for the body, you need different parts to function as the church. We rejoice when the heart and lungs function independently, but they could not function at all unless they function together. The knees require feet and thighs, muscle and bone to function as they are created. And what we may perceive to be the smallest of functions, may, in fact, be the most crucial. So, celebrate your diversity, don't fear it. In fact, respect it and encourage it!

You are the body of Christ. There is a difference between saying you are like the body of Christ. No, you are the body of Christ. I know that it is easier said than done. There are times when the brains want everybody else to act like brains and hearts want everyone to act like hearts and there is always a hangnail who brings out the hangnail in everyone else. Learning how to live in community means we give ourselves up to the working of the Holy Spirit and learn how to live with people we may not, at times, even like. Focus, in all that you say and do, in building each other up and not tearing each other down. To tear down is to hurt the entire body.

You are the body of Christ. That means when one of you suffers, the entire body suffers. We are all interconnected – whether we feel it or not, whether we like it or not. Because we are all knit together in this invisible,

unfathomable web of relationships – which, by the way- extend beyond just your individual church. You are just as connected to the people who are homeless in Atlanta, starving in South Africa, and living with violence and drug wars in Mexico, people who are suffering in unimaginable ways, as you are to the people of Greenville. You can no more turn your back on the pain and suffering of the people around this world or in your own backyard, than you can ignore the pain in your body. If you do, your whole body becomes diseased and life is diminished.

I could go on. All the brothers and sisters send you their greetings. Greet one another for me with a holy kiss. My love be with all of you in Christ Jesus.

Paul

Abraham Lincoln understood at the close of the Civil War, that our nation needed to heal together – without malice and with charity for all. If we are to survive and thrive as a nation, and as a church, we must embrace diversity and hold divisions and contradictions with compassion and love. Amen.