

“Unity in Diversity”

I Corinthians 12:12-31a

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Do you still write letters? I’m not talking about notes, which are certainly important and have their place. I’m referring to two, three and four-page letters. Many say that due to today’s technology, which keeps people in constant contact, letter writing is a dying art. I suppose it is. Even I write far fewer letters than I have in the past.

The apostle Paul was a letter writer and I am glad that he was. I am also pleased that many of his letters have been preserved and passed down to us. Other than Luke, we have more of Paul’s work than anyone in the New Testament.

Often, he wrote letters in response to questions asked of him by leaders in the churches he started. At other times, he took the initiative to write a letter because he heard of a problem that needed addressing.

This appears to be the case in today’s passage. Paul heard that the believers in the church at Corinth were quarreling and creating hardened factions. To Paul, this was dangerous and unacceptable.

You recall that this church grew out of Paul’s visit to Corinth on his second missionary journey. He took up residence with a young Jewish couple by the names of Aquila and Priscilla, who were also tentmakers.

With their help and others, like Silas and Timothy, Paul established a Christian presence in Corinth. At first, Paul preached in the synagogue. However, when tension developed between the religious leaders and Paul, he established a church in Titius Justin’s home. This church was composed of Jew and Gentile, rich and poor.

After eighteen months in Corinth, Paul moved on because of the tension between him and the leaders of the synagogue. His heart, though, remained in Corinth and his interest in the work in that strategic location, an important economic center in the Roman Empire. This is why Paul was so concerned when he heard the disturbing news about the divisive spirit in the church.

About what were the believers in Corinth arguing? They were quarreling over who among them was most important. They were squabbling over whose spiritual gift was the best, which created tension, strife and jealousy.

What did Paul tell them? He shared with them his concept of ministry, which certainly had no room for boasting or belittling others.

What was Paul’s concept of ministry? I think it revolved around two basic ideas. Every believer is a minister and every minister needs a loving, affirming and encouraging support group. Let me explain.

Based upon what Paul wrote in this passage and others, it appears to me that he felt strongly that every believer was a minister. For Paul, a minister was anyone who brought the presence of Christ into a situation.

I did not grow up in a church culture with this broad and inclusive concept of ministry. Neither have I encountered many people that did. However, I started hearing this concept of ministry from Dr. Finley Edge when I was in the seminary. His book, The Greening of the Church, was my introduction into this approach to ministry. Down through the years, others have enlightened me, which has led to a deeper understanding of discipleship and ministry.

So important is this concept of ministry at Smoke Rise that it is our church motto. “Every Member a Minister,” is one of our guiding principles. This includes young and old, male and female, new convert and seasoned Christian. Every member is a minister, not just the professional clergy.

Why do we believe this? One reason is that every person we meet needs a minister. Every person we encounter is struggling with something and needs someone to be the presence of Christ in their life. They need God’s grace and ours.

In addition, every believer has talents, skills, abilities, interests and passions that can be used to help others along their journeys. This is what spiritual gifts are and how God works through us to meet people's needs, making the world better.

I will forever be indebted to three of our members, Kathy Dobbins, Doris Nelms and Colin Harris for clarifying this for me through the resource they wrote, *Klesis: God's Call and the Journey of Faith*. Their description of the nature and purpose of spiritual gifts has been most helpful.

The difference between a talent and a spiritual gift is how it is used. When a talent is used to help others, it becomes a spiritual gift. This means there are as many spiritual gifts as there are talents and skills.

In this passage, Paul mentions some of the gifts he was aware of, especially in the Corinthian church. He does the same in Romans and Ephesians when he addresses spiritual gifts in the letters to those believers.

I do not believe these lists are exhaustive, but illustrative. If Paul were writing today, he would include gifts not mentioned in those letters, such as the gift of technology or counseling.

The beauty of spiritual gifts is that they allow every believer to become a minister. Since everyone has talents, skills, abilities, interests and passions, everyone can be the presence of Christ by using them to meet needs. Therefore, every believer can be a minister.

One thing every minister needs, however, is a support group. Ministers are not independent, but interdependent. They need a community of faith that will support and encourage them, calling out their gifts, training and equipping them. They need people who will nudge them out of their comfort zones and even partner with them to help others.

This was why Paul completely discouraged ranking spiritual gifts. He celebrated their diversity and saw how much more they could accomplish because of it. However, he knew that competing with one another for recognition would undermine the very work their gifts enabled them to do.

Just as the human body is composed of many interdependent parts, so is the spiritual body. Also like the human body, every gift is important and serves a vital purpose in the body of Christ. This is why Paul's advice to the Corinthians was to celebrate their many gifts, not rank them on a divisive scale of importance.

What are your gifts? Who needs you to be their minister? Into what situation could you bring the presence of Christ and make the world better?

Let me encourage you to take an inventory of your talents and skills. Identify your strengths and passions. Connect what you enjoy doing with those who need help. Partner with those who want to help others and cooperate with them. While some things can be done spontaneously and alone, others are more effectively done when planned in conjunction with other believers. Do both.

Let me suggest something else you can do to identify your spiritual gifts and make a contribution to the cause of Christ. **Reflect upon the ways you have been helped by others, using this body metaphor that Paul does.**

Whose arms held you when you were a frightened child? Whose hands taught you how to play a piano, shoot a basketball, make a birdhouse or write the alphabet? Who walked alongside you when you had to travel down some lonely and treacherous roads? Who heard and responded to your cries for help? Who let you pour out your burdened heart to them? Who helped you to see what is important in life? Who lifted your spirits with their encouraging words? Who cried with you when you suffered loss? Who prayed with you when you were facing a stiff challenge? Who helped you to taste the good things of life? Who helped you get rid of the ugly and destructive elements of your life? Who loved you unconditionally, with all their heart, when you needed it most?

You see what I am doing? Just as Paul used the human body to speak to his listeners of the value of diversity and unity, I am using it to help you identify your own spiritual gifts. Look at the ways others have helped you, using their talents and skills, and offer gratitude. Then follow their lead and become the good stewards they were of their skills and abilities. Just as they did these things, so can you.

I would add one more piece to this puzzle. **Let our church help you maximize your potential.** We are here to help call out your gifts and nurture, nourish, equip, train and celebrate with you, beginning

with the next *Klesis* class that begins in a couple of weeks. We want to be your biggest cheerleader and encourager. Quite frankly, we need your encouragement, too. Together, we can truly make a difference in this world, locally and globally. Join us on this journey of faith.