

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Excerpts from 1 Corinthians 12 *Spiritual Smorgasbord*

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In the 1997 NCAA Women's Basketball tournament, the third-seeded University of Tennessee's Lady Volunteers found themselves up against the first-seeded University of Connecticut's Lady Huskies in the Midwest Regional final played on the campus of the University of Iowa. On paper, Connecticut was the better team.

Well aware of what her players were up against, Lady Vol's head coach Pat Summit gathered them before the game and explained . . . "We're going to do this in potluck fashion." She told her players about her mom taking turkey to church potlucks because her mom was best at roasting a turkey. Other people in the church brought the things they were best at making—green bean casserole, mashed potatoes, coleslaw, cookies . . . Each person had a specialty and that's what was brought. After explaining to her team members about the potluck the coach posed a question about the game they were about to play, "What are you going to bring?"

Apparently, in encouraging her players to name what it was that they each were going to bring to that high-pressure tournament game, Pat Summit empowered each one of them to bring the best they had to offer. The Lady Vol's not only beat Connecticut that night but they went on to beat another first-seeded team, the Old Dominion Big Blue, in the championship game. Against the odds, the Tennessee Lady Volunteers won the NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament that year, one of the eight times the team won the championship under the team's most winningest coach, Pat Summit.

When Dave Mathia told me this story this past week, I couldn't help but think about it in terms of the scripture passage Dan read for us this morning from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. The church in Corinth was under a lot of pressure. There was fighting and jealousy between the members of the newly-founded faith-family. Some members of the church claimed that their spiritual gifts were more important than, or better than, the spiritual gifts of other people. "Yeah, well, you can speak in tongues? Big deal. So what? I can play the lute!"

Paul understands the danger in which this places the infant church. In order to survive, especially in the wider culture that is hostile to Christianity, the church had to work towards finding unity in the midst of their diversity. It was imperative that they understood that far from being an agent of division, their diversity was a gift and ought to be encouraged and treasured. Picking up the letter where Dan left off . . .

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. . . the body is not made up of one part but of many.

Paul uses this metaphor of a body to explain the fundamental nature of the church—there is one body but it has many different parts, all of which serve a different function. To really drive the point home, he continues with the following, which I find one of the more entertaining passages in scripture . . .

Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as God wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" . . . God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there

should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

I love the idea that God has put us together to be one body. Or, returning to the basketball metaphor, one team. A player who makes three point shots consistently is impressive but without a keen center, chances are that the shooter won't get many chances to make a shot. In order for the team, the body, the church to be successful—each player, each part, each member needs to bring its best. After all, a Harvest Dinner that only had turkey would be a pretty lame Harvest Dinner, indeed. And Paul writes . . .

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Friends, this is us. We have so much in common with the Corinthians. We, also, are very different one from the other. And, I don't just mean in terms of our gifts and abilities. That's pretty obvious. But we're also very different from each other in terms of our traditions, our experiences, our expectations and, dare I say it, our politics.

That's right, team. I went there. I said the "p" word in church. I've been told that the better part of wisdom is to avoid the topic but friends, something that has such sway on us outside of these walls needs to be talked about inside of these walls. Because what is most important inside of these walls is the unity Christ prayed for and the unity Paul writes about. And so if we don't name the fact that we are different and find ways to learn from our differences, what divides us out there threatens to divide us in here and that is. Not. Okay.

Because here's the thing, our political differences are something I am learning to celebrate. I hadn't thought about it this way until I was talking with my clergy friend Andy from Maine who now lives in Massachusetts when I was visiting him and enjoying some pastry in Boston's North End earlier this month. I was telling Andy that one of the greatest challenges I face in ministry is the political diversity of the people who attend church here. In previous churches I've served, and many churches served by colleagues, there is more political homogeneity than there is here. When I explained our situation he exclaimed, "That's fantastic! That is so 'Corinthians'." I nearly spit out my cannoli! How can the potential to have something that is said here be misconstrued as partisan each and every Sunday, because the outside world is pushing us into divided camps instead of united teams, how could that weekly risk and pressure possibly be "fantastic!"

Indeed, I had never thought of our diversity of ideas and perspectives as something to be celebrated. When I read or heard this passage I always just thought of our abilities and talents—like some people are fabulous musicians and other people love to extend hospitality and some people can do math.

Those are easy differences to celebrate. But, now I'm learning this new thing to celebrate, our diversity of thoughts, ideas, and perspectives. I'm learning to apply the lens that Paul places on diversity in the church not just on our different gifts and abilities but also on the more challenging stuff as well, our different ideas and perspectives. Indeed, if I may be so bold as to say it, I think the challenge makes us a stronger body. I know it makes me a more concise and careful writer. It has also made me a better listener. And, most importantly, it has made my heart grow and my compassion increase.

That being said, there is a litmus test. A litmus test provided first by Jesus and then by Paul—and that litmus test is love because the greatest of these is love.

No matter what we bring into this place, it is to be brought in love. If our gifts or talents, our experience or perspective, our opinion or our bit of educated knowledge, is not brought in love—if it is not said in love—if it is not given for the larger purpose of the building up of the church of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God—it does not belong here. If it does not pass the litmus test of loving the Lord your God with all your heart and all

your soul and all your mind and loving your neighbor as yourself, if it does not lend itself to bringing unity to the church in the midst of our diversity, it does not belong here.

Now that doesn't mean we shouldn't disagree. Indeed, we should disagree. It's how we learn and grow and thrive. The difference between in here and out there is not that we disagree, but rather it is in how we disagree. How we treat one another. How we forgive each other and ourselves. How we exercise humility in each and every one of our exchanges because we realize that each and every one of our exchanges is with another child of God—one who is, like us, fallen, loving, concerned, afraid, joy-filled, wondering, hurting, and successful—and yes, often all at the same time!

And so it is that no matter the gift, the talent, the perspective, or the opinion—whatever it is we have to bring, we bring it in love—because without love, we have lost our way.

To return briefly to the story of the University of Tennessee Lady Volunteers . . . Yes, Pat Summit was a successful coach. But, more importantly, she was an incredibly LOVING coach. It might not appear that way when watching footage of her yelling at her players during a game. But, make no bones about it, that woman loved those young women. She loved them so much that she held them to incredibly high standards of personal decorum and academic success. If a player missed a class, that player missed a game—no matter the abilities of the player or the importance of the game. Pat Summit loved her players into being the best versions of themselves that they could be—even to the point of making sure every last one of them left the University of Tennessee with a college degree. Average graduation rates for NCAA college athletes during her tenure hovered in the mid 80 percent range. But, Summit didn't use her players to achieve a goal and then leave them floundering. Rather, she loved her players, encouraged them to bring their best, and by doing so, they built themselves and each other up in love.

Friends, no matter who we are or what we've done or left undone, that's what we're here for—to love one another, to bring our best to each other—to bring love.