

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany
January 28, 2007

Pastor Mae Jean Zelle
Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

Scriptures: Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 71:1-6, 1Corinthians 12:27-13:13, Luke 4:21-30

As I promised last week, that I was going to come back to our second lessons, Paul's first letter to the 1Corinthians, chapters 12 and 13. Now, 1Corinthians 13 is probably most familiar to folks as a text frequently used at weddings. To be sure, it is a beautiful text for couples who are pledging to love and care for one another for a lifetime. We all know that there will be days when one or the other of them will need to remember that, "Love is patient, love is kind.... That ... love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things.

But when Paul wrote these words he was not thinking about husbands and wives. He was thinking about a group of people a lot like us. A church, a congregation of Christians, some brand new, some who have been around for a while, in the city of Corinth, surrounded by all the opportunities and challenges that big cities offer.

Up to this point in the letter, Paul has addressed their various squabbles and divisions individually. Now, in Chapter 12 he is trying to show them another way to think of themselves – as the Body of Christ. This wonderful and powerful image points to their differences as a good thing, and yet, they share a unity that transcends all differences.

In God's wisdom, God has put together every congregation a little like the Corinthians. Congregations are made up of people, different people each with a different set of interests and abilities. Some have gifts for teaching, others for healing, or forms of leadership, or various languages..

Are we all the same? No. Do we all speak English? Or Spanish? No. Do we all have the same resources with which to be generous? No. We each have our own gifts – whether it be for teaching or praying, for crunching numbers or cutting down trees safely, for preparing food or talking with newcomers, for singing or swinging a hammer, for working with the oldest among us, or the youngest. We all have gifts. And together we can be so much more than any one of us can be alone.

It's a little bit like the experience of a guy by the name of Slats Grobnik who sold Christmas trees. He tells the story of one couple on the hunt for a Christmas tree. The guy was skinny with a big Adam's apple and small chin, and she was kind of pretty. But both wore clothes from the bottom of the bin of the Salvation Army store.

After finding only trees that were too expensive, they found a Scotch pine that was okay on one side, but pretty bare on the other. Then they picked up another tree that was not much better—full on one side, scraggly on the other. She whispered something, and he asked if \$3 would be okay. Slats figured both trees would not be sold, so he agreed.

A few days later he was walking down the street and saw a beautiful tree in the couple's apartment. It was thick and well rounded. He knocked on their door and they told him how they worked the two trees close together where the branches were thin. Then they

tied the trunks together. The branches overlapped and formed a tree so thick you couldn't see the wire. Slats described it as "a tiny forest of its own."

"So that's the secret," Slats asserts. "You take two trees that aren't perfect, that have flaws, that might even be homely, that maybe nobody else would want. If you put them together just right, you can come up with something really beautiful." (*the late columnist Mike Royko writes about a conversation he had with Slats Grobnik, a man who sold Christmas trees*)

That story reminds me of us, here at Emanuel, a little. We have two groups of people, the folks who attend first service and those who attend second service. Each of us "a little bare" or one side or another. But we are tied together, by cords that can't be seen: our common baptism into the life and death of Jesus Christ. God has bound us together in a way that is truly beautiful. Together we are so much more than we could be alone.

Now, back to Paul. In chapter 13, Paul delivers what you might call the punch line of his whole speech about gifts. All these gifts you have are fine. But even those go only so far. There are even better gifts that we all possess, that we can all use to serve God and one another. These are the gifts of the most excellent ways: the gifts of faith, hope and love.

Think about what it might mean to have faith as a spiritual gift. Faith gives a person a sense of calm in the midst of the storm. Faith allows a person to be joyful, no matter what. Faith lets us see the light of possibility even in the moments of dark despair.

In the same way, hope is a gift. Hope gives a person confidence to stretch a little more, dare a little more, dream a little more. As a church, we need those people who can help us lift our eyes toward the horizon of the future and to see what God may have in store for us next.

And then there is the gift of love. Of the three, it is the greatest, because no matter what we do, if we do it without love, it is nothing. If we feed every single family in poverty, but don't care about them as people, it's nothing. If we give a backpack to every kid in East Dallas, but don't hold them tenderly in our hearts, it's nothing. If we build a cathedral, but don't show kindness to everyone who enters our doors, it's nothing. If we had a thousand members, but didn't care about anyone beyond our little circle of friends, it wouldn't matter. Without love, none of what we do as a congregation matters.

But as it is, we come here, to God's house, to the Lord's table, to be filled with God's forgiveness and compassion. Here we find the source of that love. God welcomes us, so we can welcome the stranger. God is generous to us, so we can be generous to others. God has called us all sons and daughters, so we can join together as brothers and sisters. And together, we are the Body of Christ. By our love, we reveal Christ, we reveal God's love, to those around us. May we be so full of faith, and hope, and love, the people can not help but see Christ is us, and at work through us. Amen.