

Even if you do not follow American-style football, there are some illustrations from the football field I expect have not slipped past you, especially from the college football crowd. You likely have seen when they hold up various placards of different colours to create their University logo, or spell out their team’s name. It’s impressive to watch. They are working together as a team, all following one leader, coordinating together under a common aim: to promote their school’s team, to cheer aloud for their team, to strive toward victory.

In nature, it’s seen in the schools of fish that swim together, like a larger entity, even though they are small themselves. Or consider darting flocks of swarming birds. How they shift about through the sky, a single, agile force of lively, calling caws and beating, buffeting wings.

What is a fitting picture of the Christian Church, and you and me in it?

The Corinthian Christians struggled at getting along with each other. There were something like four sub-churches happening under the same roof. Church Corinth was like dozens of chefs chaotically cooking in their collective kitchen. There was no unified, loving family of Christ. Under the name of “church,” there were many free-wheeling, intense personalities who kept on taking their own lead into many divisive directions. It showed up in:

Factions. There were, like, separate camps. One group called themselves followers of Paul, another group identified with Apollos, another followed Cephas or Peter. There’s a reference to Chloe’s people. Chloe was a sister in the Lord whose group sought simply and faithfully to follow Christ. (*See 1 Corinthians 1*)

Then there was a flagrant report of sexual immorality among a couple of Corinthian church members. This was of a kind not even tolerated among the pagans--a man was with his father's wife! Other matters pitted lawsuits of believers against other believers, which took them into the pagan courts. There were matters of people who participated in worship of other false gods, and of eating the foods offered to idols. And with respect even to the Lord’s Supper, people were gathering into their own camps. Some feasted and dined and celebrated the Lord’s Supper in Christ’s name, yet became drunk--while others were going hungry among them. Those were left on the outside, even though, by Holy Baptism and the gift of faith in Jesus, they were members of Christ’s very Body, the Church, in Corinth.

Like a dozen Lone Rangers riding out into the desert, each one with different pictures of villains that were wanted, all were doing their own thing. What a helter-skelter scene it was as they all strove to bring about justice in their own style.

Wow! What a parish of headstrong people they were. Yet St. Paul speaks of praying with tears before God on their behalf! The fact is, Paul makes reference to *more* letters to the Corinthians than the two we have in our Bible. He mentions at least one more, likely two, which he wrote to pastor the people of Christ in Corinth.

That partisan, “Let me follow the way I think it should go” attitude which split the Corinthian Church into so much turmoil has spread like pine beetles boring into the Ponderosa Pine forests of our 21st Century place and time. We, accustomed to our Western culture societal values, tend to like the independent, “I can do it on my own” life style. Life together is hard and awkward, so we avoid it. Those Lone Ranger solutions--going it alone--sound really good. “Hey, I’ll have one of those, too.”

Imagine looking across a football stadium at the crowd. There’s no large, coherent message to see on the other side. It’s all the usual. Many dots of various colours and shapes, but all random and mixed together. It’s little different than looking at a mountain of garbage from the distance.

What is a fitting view one should see of the Christian Church, and you and me in it?

Look now! Do you see and hear today the amazing wisdom and clear message of Christ Jesus that flows through the message of His apostle Paul?

“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.” (1 Corinthians 1:10)

And St. Paul lays down the one foundation and focus, the message that makes the difference between eternity separated from God in shame, and eternity at peace, forgiven of every failure and sin, all for the sake of the sacrificial love of God: **“We preach Christ crucified.”** (1 Corinthians 1:23)

[Here, may I insert a takeaway from the Gospel for this Third Sunday after Epiphany, Series C.] It’s like a case of inspired irony that we hear in today’s Gospel at Luke 4, how, when Jesus gives His first sermon--and that at His hometown Nazareth!--it winds up in His rejection! Jesus preaches God’s Word that describes His Messianic anointing to do some very good things! He’s anointed to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to the captives and oppressed, recovery of sight to the blind, and the year of the Lord’s favour. God’s prophetic Word has in truth been fulfilled in the peoples’ hearing! All receive His Word intently at first. But as it sinks in they cannot believe He, One they grew up with, might actually be God’s Anointed Christ. So Jesus’ work as the Christ begins as God alone could imagine, accomplish, and, indeed, endure! He is rejected. God’s eternal, loving plan to reconcile Himself with wayward, divisive, confused, and prideful sinful human beings began with what appears to be Jesus’ flunking the first time He preached. And the people are riled so greatly that they lead Him out to heave Him over the cliff at town’s edge. Jesus’ quiet miracle was to pass through their midst, unharmed, so He could continue on at God’s right time to offer His life into death on the cross at Calvary for the sins of all this world, some three years later.

So it is as St. Paul underscores: **“We preach Christ crucified.”** And now God is dealing through His called Apostle Paul by written Word to address the tensions of disunity and lovelessness among God’s called-out people in Corinth. Paul reasserts the power for the life of God among them, for unity and harmony. He emphasizes their life together then, and ours also now, is in Jesus Christ Himself. For the message of the cross, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, is God’s wisdom and power, into which every one--yes, you and I--are made alive, baptized into Jesus’ death and made alive to God through His resurrection!

At 1 Corinthians chapter 12, last week and today’s texts, St. Paul also addresses what are the fitting and beneficial uses of the various spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit given to the believers in Jesus Christ. They are given and distributed by the One Lord. They are given not for the sake of creating more pandemonium, more Lone Rangers out doing their own thing, but for the sake of unity and building up of the One Body. This is Christ’s Body. It is His Church. Many and various members of the body--each different, are yet, each one, essential to the

function of the whole body. The Body of Christ is united and coordinated. Each member belongs, and under the Head, Jesus Christ, the members bless and support each other.

Fascinating is God’s design in the nature of how He has composed His Body. Certain parts, which seem to be weaker, are more indispensable. Some less honourable are situated as to be given greater honour. Those parts which in one way are not presentable are treated conversely with the greater honour. And all this works in the way that the whole body actually benefits, as loving respect and care magnify the work of God among His precious children and people. These are indeed fitting words to not only guide, but lead and encourage us at Redeemer, this year, 2025, given the changes we face together.

All this--v.25--**“that there may be no division in the body.”**

Note how God’s plan uses this very diversity of members to augment the element of care for one another. If one suffers, all suffer together; if one is honoured, all rejoice together. There is no envy or strife. Furthermore, Paul is inspired to focus all these various gifts in a yet more excellent way. (Do you recall what that’s about?) Yes, it’s the *most excellent way*.

1 Corinthians 13, describes *agape love* at the core of living. It sums up: These three. . .faith, hope, and love. . .abide, and the greatest of these is love. This unfailing, unconditional, self-sacrificing love is grounded in the message of Christ Jesus crucified. This is love, God style, for us sinners!

Members of Christ’s Body here at Redeemer, what do we reflect about our Lord, in whose Body we, by grace, have been called and made part? We are called by Jesus to reflect together, not the spirit of this age, not some pattern of saddling up and riding off haughty or aloof and alone, or perhaps riding for hiding at home, like Lone Ranger Christians. St. Paul’s words today exclaim: There are no Lone Ranger Christians in Christ’s Body. He is the Head, and all reflect Him. So too, you and I are united through Holy Baptism into His Body. It’s not by some choice depending on us, nor by a passing of an exam that He unites us with Himself. The power for your salvation and mine is the working of His Holy Spirit to create faith in us in Him. In His Name we begin anew: In the Name of the One God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is His loving grace that is successful to forgive, renew, and love us into His Kingdom.

So let’s do one more illustration. Imagine you and I are seated in the large arena of life, and the masses are viewing the scene. We each have a mirror, which can reflect whatever it points to. First, imagine we each point in whatever way we choose. Like riding Lone Ranger style, we could blend right in with our world, and be no different than the mixture of debris heaped into a mountain of trash.

But now imagine you hold up your mirror aimed outward, to reflect the bright Light of Jesus Christ. Imagine you offer up your spiritual gift, as the member of His Body, the Church, to which you have been called. And together, we, members reflecting the message of Christ and Him crucified, died, and risen again, show to the world the unified message of His grace. Such is our privilege together, to share in the worship and confession of Jesus’ name. We are united by Him when we are nourished by the preaching of His Word and the Sacraments of Holy Baptism for faith and the Lord’s Supper of His Body and Blood, given for our forgiveness and strengthening in faith of His victory on the cross. In love, He presents us as His sign to the world. We are living mirrors who reflect Christ’s living light.