

Rev. Melanie Smith
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church
Mar. 21, 2021

Psalm 139.1-18
1 Corinthians 12.12-20, 27

All, but One

The city of Corinth is described by many scholars as being at the crossroads of east-west and north and south trade. It was located on a Isthmus, only about four miles across--it was a port city that facilitated trade with Rome and Italy, as well as Ephesus and Asia. While it was a hub for trade, it was also a place of homegrown industry. Because while Corinth was a port city it also had natural resources—because of their access to water, they were able to “manufacture bricks, pottery, roof tiles, terracotta ornaments, and utensils.”

And if all of this wasn’t enough, Corinth also played host to the Isthmian Games, which were only second to the Olympic Games. Every two years, Corinth would have been flooded with participants and spectators who arrived from all over Rome and the East.

This hub of trade, industry and travel, was a complex mix of visitors, immigrants and citizens, of wealthy merchants, entrepreneurs and trade smiths. And it was into this diverse ecosystem of humanity that the Apostle Paul traveled to share the good news of God breaking into the world, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

While we don’t have first hand accounts or a detailed history from the members of the Church in Corinth, there’s a lot we can understand from Paul’s two letters.

From what scholars can piece together, Paul went on three missionary journeys. And each time he would arrive in a new city, he would get to know the community, learn if there was anyone who already knew about Jesus, and if it was possible, he would help form a church.

After a church was formed, he would depart for a new city and start the whole process over—but regardless of distance Paul always stayed in touch with the churches he helped form. Sometimes the congregations would write to him with questions—after all Paul would only spend a few months in each place—there was a lot to cover, so sometimes communities wanted clarity on theological issues. Other times, Paul would get word that something was happening in one of the communities and then he would write a letter in response.

1 Corinthians is one of those letters. Apparently, word had gotten back to Paul that not all was well in the Church in Corinth...

In the first chapter of his letter, Paul details how the church is deeply divided—factions have sprung up—people are claiming to be disciples or followers of apostles and they have formed little groups—but as the letter goes on Paul lifts up what he is truly troubled over—the elevation of some members and their spiritual gifts, over others.

In chapter 12 Paul reminds this faithful group of people that through baptism, God has not simply brought them into the church but grafted them into the body of Christ where everyone—in their own unique way, is just as needed and valued as another.

This duality of being who we truly are, and joined into the body of Christ is like holding Psalm 139 in one hand and Paul's letter in the other. The Psalmist tells us, that we are each formed and knit together—fearfully and wonderfully made. That nothing about who we are, is ever a surprise to God—because God's eyes beheld our unformed substance. God knows us better than we know ourselves, nothing about us is a

mistake—the gifts and talents you possess, the identity you claim and how you show up in the world—was all created in love by God. And it's this unique, quirky, beloved soul—specifically gifted the way you are, that God welcomes, and grafts you into the body of Christ.

This is at the heart of chapter 12—somehow in the church of Corinth some were being made to feel that their gifts weren't welcome—or weren't as important as others—So Paul proclaims, If the foot would say, because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body...If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you, nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.”

It's as though Paul is saying, If we all talked, worked, looked and acted a like, we would miss out on the beautiful gifts God has intended us to see, value and honor in each other.

When we are grafted into the body of Christ—we do not give up our own identities and what makes us uniquely us—because God doesn't expect us to conform so that we are all the same—instead, in the body of Christ, we are needed, just as we are.

On the afternoon of March 7, our confirmation class along with their families, gathered on the front lawn of the church. That day marked the culmination of their confirmation process. It's easy to say that this year was a very different year for our confirmands. We were lucky enough to gather a few times in person, but the majority of our classes were held over zoom.

But as different as this year was—a few things remained the same—our confirmands asked hard questions, engaged in conversations and wondered together about who God is and how our faith informs our lives.

As our confirmands were received as full members of Ladue Chapel—we also talked about how they are members of the body of Christ--so this is just a reminder--You—the confirmands and now members of Ladue Chapel, are equal members in the body of Christ. We need you, not for who you will be someday, but for who you are now—we need your creativity, your imagination, your gift for doing math, your ability to write poetry, your passion for robotics, your insight into the world, your understanding of who God is and God’s love for us.

God created you just as you are—beautifully perfect in all your imperfection—you have also been grafted into the body of Christ—a body that cannot fully function without you.

Because where would we be as the body of Christ without each other? Where would we be without our students—who dare to ask questions, think in new ways and who invite us to live our faith boldly in the world? Where would we be without our elders, who laid the foundation we stand on, provide guidance when we’re lost and whose faith points us forward? Where would we be without those whose hands care for our building and maintain our grounds?

Where would we be without our musicians whose voices and creativity catch and carry us into God’s presence?

Where would we be without each other, each reflecting back the image of God, doing our faithful best to follow where God leads, supporting, encouraging and loving each other closer into God’s kingdom, somehow All, but one.

May it be so, for you and for me. Amen