

**“A Still More Excellent Way” Rev. Michele Ward 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Year C Epiphany January 23, 2022 Ordination and Installation of Officers
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD**

The Scripture reading today comes from the apostle Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth. Listen now for a Word from God.

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a (NRSV): For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 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. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, 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? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so

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arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

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Too fat too skinny / too tall too short

Too loud too quiet / Too smart too slow

Too wide too narrow / too big too small

What if I told you that these words

don't have any power over me anymore?

What if I told you that I have slowly extracted their poison

from my body and my mind and learned to love myself?

What if I told you that all of the negative things that you believe about your body are not true? That even the apostle Paul would tell you, “Do not dream of being someone that you are not.” You are meant to be the you that you are, the very you that God had in mind when God created you to be yourself. That is the you that God loves, that we love in this church community. That is the you that your family loves, your friends love. And that is the you that you must learn to love.

Paul says, “And I will show you a still more excellent way.”

What could be more excellent than learning to embrace your gifts? What could be more excellent than learning exactly what you bring to this specific time and place in history? What could be more excellent than sharing your gifts with others? Paul wrote to a church, in the city of Corinth, full of division. Caught up in classism as a church, they were replicating the Roman caste system through the way they practiced communion. Some were getting drunk and others were not receiving their fair share of the meal. People were seated around the table based on rank and status.

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In the chapter directly before this one, Paul admonishes them for these practices, telling them that the Christian community is not meant to replicate the systems that they see around them. He then goes on to illustrate his point by using the metaphor of the body in the next chapter, the one we are studying together this morning. According to Christ, all people are the same. Their Jewish identity or Gentile identity, their status as a Roman citizen, a free person or an enslaved person—these identifiers do not matter to God.

What matters to God is that the Holy Spirit dwells within each of them just the same, that they are all marked by the same baptism and profession of faith. If everyone was the same part of the body, Paul argues, then the metaphor of the body does not hold up. Then we would all be a hand or an ear, rather than a diverse collection of parts working together. Envyng someone else or pining away to become what they are is the opposite of what Paul is trying to communicate. He wants the church in Corinth to embrace the unique gifts that are present among them! He wants them to appreciate and perhaps even celebrate the gifts they are as people. Simply by existing, each of them brings something special to the church.

To solidify his point, Paul starts listing off some of the roles that exist in their community. Apostles. Prophets. Teachers. Miracle workers. Healers. Helpers. Leaders. Speaking in tongues. No single person can fill all of these roles, and no person is meant to have all of these abilities. The point of having such a variety of people in any church community is to stop us from behaving

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as if the same five people need to do everything and be good at everything all of the time. God did not design us that way.

None of us are superheroes who can do it all, but some of us definitely like to pretend. Paul would consider this a problem. He would see those of us running around trying to be all things to all people and tell us to stop. He would see those of us standing off the sidelines to stop hiding our gifts from ourselves and others. He would see those of us living into our gifts and rejoice with us. To say yes to living into your gifts requires the spiritual practice of setting boundaries. Of saying no to taking on tasks outside of our giftings and making room in our lives for God to show us how to utilize the gifts that we have in abundance. To say yes to living into your gifts requires the spiritual practice of loving the unique way that God made us. Of celebrating and pursuing ways to deepen the gifts and skills that God gave each of us from the very moment we were born.

This morning, directly after the sermon, we will ordain and install new officers into leadership positions in the church community. We will ordain and install ruling elders to serve as part of the church session and deacons to provide pastoral care and hospitality. In these roles they are fulfilling their calls to love God and serve the church. Some of the same vows that teaching elders, or pastors, make on their ordination days are made by our ruling elders and deacons today. Vows to serve with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. Vows to follow Jesus Christ, to love their neighbors, and to work for the reconciliation of the world.

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These are promises that deacons and ruling elders make with you, the congregation, with God, and with themselves, in order to fulfill their commitment to ministry. Elders and deacons have specific responsibilities, to be sure; no elder or deacon is exactly alike, and nor do we as a church body want that to be the case. Their breadth of faith journeys, skills, passions, and personalities are a representation of you all—of the Body of Christ in motion, here at Brown Memorial.

But the leadership of our congregation is not left up to them, to the trustees, or to the staff. All of us are leaders, here, called to be in this church to listen and respond to God’s call on our lives. No matter how talented or talentless you may believe yourself to be, you have something to contribute. You have a place here at Brown Memorial, in your neighborhood, in your workplace, in Baltimore City.

The more excellent way, Paul says, is right here, waiting for each of us to take it and live it. Rather than become stuck in games of comparison and envy, Paul challenges the church in Corinth and the gathered community at Brown Memorial to choose the more excellent way—the way of unity in our diversity, and in the necessity of our diversity in our common life. Amen.