



**Mennonite  
Church  
Canada**

Resource Centre

## **Sermon**

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## **United in the Spirit**

*Week of Prayer: Praying over the broken body of Christ*  
*1 Corinthians 12*

“Praying over the broken body of Christ” is our theme this week. Tonight we will explore 1 Corinthians 12 as our main text. I have prepared this study with Dan Nighswander study outline in hand.

I would like to begin with a kind of un-likely parable from our own time which I read in “the Globe and Mail.”

In the suburbs of Los Angeles, there lived a young man who would spend his time sitting in his back yard...drinking beer.

One day he imagined something entirely amazing. In his imagination he saw himself able to fly. And as he thought about it he said: Why not? I could do it!

First he needed some equipment; so off he went. He returned with a supply of weather balloons, a helium tank and some rope. He then filled the balloons, carefully tying them to his lawn chair.

He lashed himself in place in his lawn chair, then instructed his friends to cut the ropes that had anchored him to the ground,... and up he went.

His theory had been that he would gently ascend and hover over his neighbourhood. He would look down at his amazed friends below and wave.

They in turn would wave back with great admiration! When time came to come down, he would simply shoot out the balloons with his '22

and drift serenely to the earth. What could possibly go wrong?!

What actually happened,... (and this is a true story) was that he rose rapidly into the air to 11,000 feet...and as it turned out, into the flyway approaching L.A. international airport.

An air-traffic controller was amazed to receive a message from the pilot of an in-coming Continental flight, that he had sighted a man in a lawn chair at 11,000 feet!

After the intervention of the air force and an LA Police Department helicopter, the lawn-chair aviator was brought back down to earth, to answer, not a few questions.

Our lawn chair-aviator's adventure bears comparison with the general drift of much contemporary “spirituality:”

It is highly individualistic,

The point of the adventure is experience-seeking, What he ends up doing is quite useless.

As the story relates to our text, we might observe that the Lawn chair-aviator was neither called nor gifted to fly; even though we might admire his sense of adventure; it was profoundly wrong-headed.

Even though this story is far-fetched and unusual it is no stranger than many so called spiritual goings-on around us in our day.

Spirituality was the focus of controversy and division in the church of Corinth. "Who was most spiritual?" was a matter of conflict among the believers. And the conflict had polarized them into a number of factions. Each claimed spiritual certification from one of the apostles: Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and one group made a unique claim on Christ!

As we study the letter to the Corinthians, what kind of spirituality does Paul teach this church?

1. First, it is a CALLED spirituality. It is not something that just kind of bubbles up out of our sense of need or boredom. (such as with the lawn chair-aviator.) God is the initiator. God calls; we respond.

*"To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ- their Lord and ours."(1 Cor. 1:2.)*

So Paul begins the letter. The beginning point of their spirituality was their calling from God. Consequently, their spirituality was about their relationship with Jesus, and the purpose of this spirituality was tied up in the word "holy;" that is, they were called and set apart for a purpose beyond themselves and this calling and purpose was to be pursued "with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Right away here we see that Paul's vision was that Christians were to pursue their calling not just with their own group, but "together with ALL those EVERYWHERE who call on the name of Jesus."

What implications does that have for how we think about our brothers and sisters in other denominations?

The idea of God calling people is found right from the beginning of the Biblical narrative.

The original call-story was God calling Adam and Eve...calling them to walk with God and to exercise leadership and responsibility in the garden: to name the animals and to care for creation as stewards.

Then God called Abraham and Sarah to leave their home and family and to go to a land God would show them. God promised to bless them and to make them a great blessing to the whole world.

If we surveyed the Bible we would find a long list of callings and giftings for the call. Joseph, Moses, Esther, and many other.

Do you feel God's call for you? Are you pursuing the nature of God's call for your congregation?

2. Second, the spirituality that Paul teaches is a CONNECTED and CONNECTING spirituality. Just as its origin is in God's initiating relationship with them, so its discovery, affirmation and out-working is experienced with others in the church community. Christian spirituality is profoundly relational, both vertically with God, and horizontally with one-another.

The profound implications of a spirituality that is realized in a matrix of community relationship, divine and human, is wonderfully illustrated in chapter 12 in Paul's lovingly worked out metaphor of the church as a physical body.

This teaching is given as a corrective to the ways that the Corinthians were misfiring in their highly individualistic, competitive and divisive spirituality.

In the study outline, Dan Nighswander has outlined their errors:

The first error was the notion that "we would be better off if we would all have the same gifts." The gifts in mind, were no doubt the more dramatic and colourful gifts... like speaking in tongues or the gift of healing.

Paul illustrates the patent absurdity of this notion;

*"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 second wrong notion would be expressed like this: that "my gifts, convictions and values are superior to yours or that your gifts are superior to mine." This was the problem of putting some gifts up and some down.

Again, he draws on the body metaphor, illustrating that there is in a healthy body, no sense of any bodily part being over or under or over-against another.

*"The eye cannot say of the hand I don't need you' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'"*

The underlying truth is that Christian spirituality is one where our need for one another is embraced and celebrated. This is not weakness. This is not immaturity; this is wellness at the deepest level.

Our gifts are given to us as individuals in order to serve the whole community. In terms of the words that Abraham and Sarah first heard; "we are blessed to be a blessing."

A complete body demands variety, diversity and equality of respect between all the members.

Somebody said: "If all the people who were asleep in the church would be laid end to end,

...they would be more comfortable!"

We are not always comfortable with one another. God did not put us together for comfort as the first priority, but for worship and for service, to become God's reconciling community in a divided and alienated world.

3. Third, Christian spirituality is worked out in holding rightness of doctrine with faithfulness in relationships. It's about holding together these values which we have unfortunately made into polarities; and the only way that is possible is with "agape" love. This theme Paul explores in 1 Corinthians 13.

Righteousness is often polarized with relationship.

Paul embraces both poles, righteousness and relationship, without letting go of either end.

Have you ever pondered the amazing impact that this wonderful chapter would have had on those fractious Corinthians on its first hearing?

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul sets up the standard of graciousness and longsuffering that is needed in any setting where folks have polarized and find themselves in conflict over who is most faithful, who is wisest, and who has the most important spiritual gifts.

1 Corinthians 13 was not written with weddings in view; it is not meant to be a poem on a wall; it was written as therapeutic medicine for addressing the ills of divisiveness in the Corinthian congregation.

It was written to affect the brokenness in the church of Corinth.

Spiritual gifts are not pearls to be worn for purposes of admiration; spiritual gifts are for giving, for exercising, for use. They are calls to service that will lead to exhaustion, rather than a sense of ascendancy and self-importance.

There is a story in Mark 2 which illustrates the true nature of how spiritual gifts are to be used in a community of faith.

Read Mark 2: 2-5

At the beginning of this story, there was a crippled man, who had some friends. And there was Jesus. Nothing would have happened; this story would not be in the Bible, if someone's imagination had not found expression and led to a whole variety of acts of faith.

Were these friends having tea together, when someone said... they had heard that Jesus the healer was in town?

Let's imagine how it might have happened.

Out of any group of friends one is likely to be more imaginative, more passionate than the rest...leading with the heart. When he heard that Jesus was in town, he said:

LET'S TAKE HIM TO JESUS!

The 2nd man loved his friend as much, but his emotions were slower in stirring; yet he had faith. He was confident in Jesus' power to heal. So he said:

LET'S CARRY HIM TO JESUS.

So it was that his belief was added to the compassion of his friend. They then asked their other two friends to help carry him to find Jesus.

Soon they were confronted with a big problem: They could not get through the tight unyielding crowd.

The 3rd friend was not especially compassionate by temperament, nor did he easily believe things he could not see; in fact he was a bit of a cynic. But he was a clever problem solver....so he said:

I KNOW! LET'S TAKE OUR FRIEND AROUND THE BACK AND GET HIM UP ON THE ROOF; THEN WE CAN LOWER HIM DOWN IN FRONT OF JESUS.

By this time, they had carried the crippled man to the roof. What now?

The 4th friend was not at all spiritually inclined, but he was strong and very bold. So as the other 3 stopped to ponder the impossibilities suggested by the roof that existed between them and Jesus, the 4th friend got down on his hands and knees and began to deconstruct the roof.

Soon the crippled man was being lowered down in front of Jesus. Then Jesus healed him.

This story suggests that even when any one of us are woefully inadequate to accomplish what needs to be done in seeking the fulfilment of God's kingdom, much can be done, when our imaginations are opened to what God can do, and we begin to work together with the gifts that God has given us.

It is a story that fleshes out the kind of love described in chapter 13, and that Jesus held up when he affirmed that what our lives are to be about as churches, is to love the lord our God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbour as ourselves.