

BEING BUILT UP AS GOD'S PEOPLE
Sermon for the 5th Sunday after the Epiphany 2022
1 Corinthians 14:12-20

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the Second Reading from before, 1 Corinthians 14:12-20: **So, since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, you too should try to excel in them that the church may be edified.** ¹³ **Therefore, let the person who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret!** ¹⁴ **For, if I pray in a tongue, my spirit is praying, but my mind is not productive.** ¹⁵ **What is the conclusion then? I shall pray with my spirit and shall also pray with my mind. I shall sing with my spirit and shall also sing with my mind.** ¹⁶ **Otherwise, if you praise God only with your spirit, how can the person who occupies the place of an uninformed person say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying?** ¹⁷ **For you indeed are giving thanks well, but the other person is not edified.** ¹⁸ **I thank God that I speak in tongues more than you all,** ¹⁹ **but, in the church, I would rather say five words with my understanding, that I may also instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.** ²⁰ **Fellow-Christians, stop being childish in your minds! Be infants in evil but be mature in your minds!**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Why does the pastor wear a gown or robe when conducting the service? One good reason is that *it hides the man*, concealing who he is. It's meant to make him *more anonymous*. All we see of him during the service is his head and his hands: his head is uncovered so that he can clearly speak the Word of God to you. His hands are free so that he can apply water with the Word or to place the body and blood of our Lord into your hands and mouths. It prevents the service from being all about him because the service isn't about the pastor's performance or personality – no - this is called the Divine Service because *the Lord is present here, serving us, forgiving our sins*.

Keeping that in mind, listen to Paul when he writes, **"So, since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, you too should try to excel in them that the church may be edified."** What does Paul mean to convey with these words and the following passages of our text?

Last week we heard Paul describe the one gift of God's Spirit in which every Christian should be striving to excel: the gift of love. It's the highest goal to which we can aspire. And, of course, he's not talking about love in the sense that we often use the word when what we mean is a warm feeling of attraction or affection. No, when Paul speaks of love, he means the divine sort of love that Christ displayed when He gave Himself as the sacrifice for our sins. It's not a feeling; but rather a commitment to disregard self-interest and devote oneself fully to the good of others. It's the kind of love that Paul describes as patient, kind, not envious. *"It does not brag or become conceited.* ⁵ *It does not behave dishonourably. It is not selfish. It does not become irritated. It keeps no record of wrongs.* ⁶ *It does not delight in wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth.* ⁷ *It covers everything in silence; it believes everything; it hopes for everything; it endures everything"* (1 Corinthians 13:5-7).

Just as Christ in love gave himself to death for us, Paul envisions Christians giving themselves continually in life for each other: always forgiving, always helping, always doing whatever is in our power to improve the physical and spiritual wellbeing of one another.

Following all this, then, in today's lesson, Paul applies the principle of Christian love to what goes on when the congregation meets for worship. The Corinthian church was messed up. In no area was this truer than its worship practices. They pretty much had the whole thing turned around. Instead of understanding their gathering for worship first and foremost as a time for receiving God's gifts, that is, for being strengthened and built up in holy faith by hearing God's Word and having it explained and applied to their lives, and for receiving God's assurance of forgiveness in the Lord's Supper - instead of all that - they saw their time of worship mostly as an opportunity to show off and impress one another with the gifts (spiritual and otherwise) that they'd already received. Some of the people in the congregation who had the gift of tongues were abusing it.

When the church would come together for worship, some would imagine that they were on stage and would ask to

lead prayers or sing psalms. Then off they'd go in a language no one in the congregation understood. Paul realised this kind of abuse and said, **"if I pray in a tongue, my spirit is praying, but my mind is not productive."** Being filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul understood that he, like others with the same gift, had the gift of speaking the Gospel in other languages, but since his mind was not productive, not engaged with his spirit, he was unable to communicate that spiritual utterance in meaningful terms in the languages known by the listeners.

Imagine what it would be like to attend a worship service where parts of the service you could understand just fine when everyone would be speaking the same language, but other parts - when the tongue speakers are doing their thing - you sit there and stare at the ceiling waiting for them to finish. While you may very well be impressed with their ability, hearing them wouldn't do you any good whatsoever even if they were praying the most magnificent prayers and declaring the wonders of God in Christ with exquisite elegance, because you couldn't understand a word of what they were saying, and Paul said this was not for the edifying of the church. This is the main point of the text.

Paul had resolved to pray and sing not only with his spirit but *also* with his mind and faculties of understanding. He wrote, **"I shall pray with my spirit and shall also pray with my mind. I shall sing with my spirit and shall also sing with my mind."** Why? Paul understood that speaking in tongues was not primarily a form of teaching, directed to human beings, but consisted of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving *addressed to God*, and, as exalted and worthy as such expressions may be, he determined to set an example by ensuring that in *public worship* anything he said in a tongue *would be translated for the benefit of the congregation*. If the one speaking in tongues is praising God only in spirit, it is impossible for anyone who does not understand that foreign prayer language to adopt and affirm the prayer as his own with an "amen." Amen means, "Yes, yes, let it be so." Paul writes, **"if you praise God only with your spirit, how can the person who occupies the place of an uninformed person say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying?"** No matter how fine the speaker's thanksgiving may be, if it is in a language unknown to others, the only person to be edified is the *speaker himself*. Everyone else receives no spiritual benefit because the speaker's only concern is for his private conversation with God.

Paul writes, **"since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, you too should try to excel in them that the church may be edified."** The Greek word here for **"eager"** is the literal word for "zealots." We remember how Simon was called "the Zealot."¹ The Jews, including Paul himself, were "zealots" for God and His Law², and Paul reminds Titus and us that Jesus *"gave Himself for us, to redeem us from all wickedness and to cleanse for Himself a people that is His very own and eager (zealous) to do good works"* (Titus 2:14). To be eager or zealous therefore is to place all one's energy toward a worthy goal, and in this instance, Paul urges the Corinthians to excel in spiritual gifts **"that the church may be edified."** What does it mean to edify? It means to build up, to strengthen and to encourage. What is the church? Here, the word (*ecclesia*) means the congregation - the people of God gathered in that place. Therefore, all that is done in worship, Paul says, is to build up, strengthen and encourage the people of God.

What is it that builds up, strengthens and encourages the people of God? **The Gospel**. The forgiveness of sins that Christ has won by His death and resurrection on our behalf, given out by our Lord in His Word and Sacraments. Nothing else takes away sins. Nothing else strengthens faith. Nothing else gives eternal life.

That explains the furniture you see: the pulpit and lectern are here for the proclamation on Jesus' life-giving Word. The baptismal font is for Holy Baptism, of course, where the Lord washes sins away and joins us to His death and resurrection. The altar stands as the location for the Lord's Supper, where Jesus gives us His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins.

That explains the pastors' robes, as we said before: they hide the man because the man isn't important: the Word of Christ that he proclaims is what gives life. That's the why of the liturgy, which ceaselessly proclaims Jesus, both His death and resurrection and His presence with us to save.

It's also why so many see Lutheran worship as *passive* and criticise it for the same reason. *"You Lutheran-types don't use your gifts in worship the way you're supposed to."* Thus in many churches, worship can almost begin to resemble a talent show as different members demonstrate what gifts they have - or think they have. But what is the purpose of worship? **To build you up as God's people** - and that is the work of Jesus, not you. Here we receive the

¹ Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13

² Acts 21:20; 22:3; Galatians 1:14

forgiveness of sins and life and salvation; then, we depart to the world out there. And what do we do in the world out there? That is where we use the gifts that God has given to serve other people. The Lord has given each one of us certain spiritual gifts so that we can put them to use in the service of the church - not to bring glory to ourselves, which would be an abuse of the gift; but for the glory of God, the building up of His kingdom, and the strengthening of our brothers and sisters in Christ. We still sing and speak and confess and pray - why? To give thanks to God and proclaim that life-giving Word to one another: thus Jesus our Head uses each one of us, His body, to care for one another here. But He is still the Guest and Host of honour here, present to heal and forgive and save. Everything that happens here should keep the spotlight firmly on Him, and we are firmly focused on Him when we are firmly focused on His Word.

So rejoice! Rather than be distracted by ten thousand words we cannot understand, we gather here to hear the Word of God, for by His Word Jesus edifies us for eternal life. And thus, while St. Paul wished to say five words, for Jesus' sake, we have these eight: We are forgiven for all of our sins. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Father in heaven, we who are Your children by grace pray that Your kingdom may come. We thank and praise You that You have revealed Jesus as Lord and Christ, and as King for evermore. We pray that His rule may be established from sea to sea and from the rising to the setting of the sun, that every nation, people, and tribe may confess that He is Lord, to Your glory. We thank You that, though He is King of kings, He humbled Himself and became our servant, so that He might be our Saviour, able to save all who come to You through Him.

Gracious Father, You do not enjoy seeing sinners die, but would rather see them turn from their sinning and live. Therefore spread the Gospel, and extend Your kingdom among all nations on earth. Cause the mighty to bow before Jesus their Lord, and teach all people to know that there is healing and saving power only in Him.

Although we rejoice that Your kingdom is already with us, make it come with fresh power and new blessing into our lives. Make the peace of Christ to rule in our hearts, and move us to thankfulness and praise. Give us increased trust in Your Word and obedience to Your commandments. Give us grace to be humble, merciful, kind, and forgiving. Make Christ's message in all its richness live in our hearts and direct all we do and say. Grant that we, redeemed in body and spirit, may be dead to sin and alive to righteousness. Lead us to rejoice in Your grace, and to give thanks for Your mercy day by day.

We pray for Your Church on earth. Keep it from weakness and error, from unfaithful shepherds and false teachers. Protect us from heresy and division. Defend us from the lies of Satan and from the schemes of godless men. Make Your Church secure against the powers of hell. Teach Your people to be patient in hope, firm in trust, and faithful in prayer, until that day comes when You send Your angels to gather Your own into Your everlasting kingdom.

Comfort those who are cast down. Give patience to the sick, peace to the anxious, strength to the weak, help to the needy, and forgiveness to the repentant.

Pour out Your mercy on us all, and teach us to set our hearts on things above, where Christ our Lord lives and reigns. In His holy and precious name we pray. Amen.

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Isaiah 6:1-13

¹ In the year when King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a high and lofty throne. The train of His robe was filling the Temple. ² Seraphs were standing above Him. Each had six wings; each was using two wings to cover his face; each was using two wings to cover his legs; and each was using two wings to fly. ³ The one was calling to the other and saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts! His glory fills the whole earth!"

⁴ The voices of those who were calling out caused the foundations of the doorposts to shake, and the Temple

was filled with smoke. ⁵ Then I said: "How terrible for me! For I have been brought to silence. For I am a man with unclean lips and live among people with unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."

⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, with a glowing coal in his hand. He had used tongs to take it from the altar. ⁷ He touched my mouth with it and said: "Look! This has touched your lips. Your guilt has been taken away, and your sin has been atoned for."

⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?"

Then I said, "Here I am. Send me!"

⁹ He said: "Go and tell this people: 'Keep on listening but do not understand, and keep on seeing but do not perceive!'" ¹⁰ Make the heart of this people insensitive, make their ears dull and seal their eyes shut, that they may not see with their eyes or hear with their ears and that their hearts may not understand, so that they should not turn back and find healing for themselves!"

¹¹ Then I said, "How long, O Lord?"

He replied: "Until the cities lie desolate with no inhabitants, the houses are without people and the ground is devastated and deserted, ¹² until the LORD completely removes the people far away, and there is a large abandoned area in the middle of the land. ¹³ Even if a tenth remains in the land, it will again serve as firewood. As the terebinth and the oak tree leave a stump when they are cut down, so a holy seed will be the stump of the land."

1 Corinthians 14:12-20

¹² So, since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, you too should try to excel in them that the church may be edified. ¹³ Therefore, let the person who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret! ¹⁴ For, if I pray in a tongue, my spirit is praying, but my mind is not productive. ¹⁵ What is the conclusion then? I shall pray with my spirit and shall also pray with my mind. I shall sing with my spirit and shall also sing with my mind. ¹⁶ Otherwise, if you praise God only with your spirit, how can the person who occupies the place of an uninformed person say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? ¹⁷ For you indeed are giving thanks well, but the other person is not edified. ¹⁸ I thank God that I speak in tongues more than you all, ¹⁹ but, in the church, I would rather

say five words with my understanding, that I may also instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue. ²⁰ Fellow-Christians, stop being childish in your minds! Be infants in evil but be mature in your minds!

Luke 5:1-11

¹ While the people were crowding around Jesus as they were listening to the Word of God, He was standing beside the Lake of Gennesaret. ² He saw two boats standing on the shore of the lake. The fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³ Then Jesus got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from the shore. He sat down and began to teach the crowd from the boat. ⁴ When He had stopped speaking, He told Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch!"

⁵ Simon answered, "Master, we have been working hard all night and have caught nothing. Nevertheless, at Your Word, I shall let down the nets."

⁶ When the men had done this, they caught a very large number of fish, and their nets began to tear. ⁷ They signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They came, and they filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me! For I am a sinful man, Lord."

⁹ He and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken, ¹⁰ and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were Simon's partners. Then Jesus told Simon, "Stop being afraid! From now on you will be catching people."

¹¹ When they had brought the boats to the shore, they left everything and became His followers.