

**Third Sunday of Epiphany**  
**January 22, 2006**  
**Romans 12:6-16a**

*Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke*

**We're in This Together**

1. Using our gifts for the common good
2. Producing fruit in every good work

***NIV Romans 12:6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. <sup>7</sup> If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; <sup>8</sup> if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.***

***<sup>9</sup> Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. <sup>10</sup> Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. <sup>11</sup> Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.***

***<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.***

Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus,

As the Declaration of Independence was being signed, Ben Franklin is supposed to have warned his fellow signers of the possible consequences of putting their names to that document. "We must all hang together," he said, "or assuredly we shall all hang separately." Today's epistle lesson is about hanging together, hanging together as Christians, that is. In the opening verses of this 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, the Holy Spirit invokes one of his favorite images of the church, the image of the church as a human body. It says there, "*Just as each of us has one body with many members, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*" Christ is the head and we believers with our varied gifts and abilities are joined together to form his body. Paul says nearly the same thing to the Corinthians: "**Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.**" (1 Cor. 12:27)

This is a beautiful and comforting way of portraying the Christian church. It speaks of our connection to Christ. He made us members of his body, the church, by the washing with water through the Word in Holy Baptism. And our Savior

continues to nourish us. Jesus feeds and cares for his body, the church. Through Jesus Christ we are holy and blameless in God's sight, a radiant church.

So how does this glorious identity as members of Christ's body play out in the everyday life of the church? Is this body of which we are members like that of highly-trained athlete, like a decathlete, combining speed and power with stamina as we make our way heavenward? Or would it be more accurate to say that this body shows signs of weakness, limping and wheezing as it staggers heavenward? In the recognition that it's too often the latter, our epistle lesson this morning reminds us that **We're in This Together**, 1) using our gifts for the common good, and 2) producing fruit in every good work.

### **1. Using our gifts for the common good**

To properly understand this section of Romans, it's important to know how this chapter begins. The first word in Romans 12 is "therefore." This "therefore" signals that Paul is now going to apply what he's been writing about for 11 chapters. What we've heard to this point is 11 chapters of law and gospel, with the gospel predominating. Though we've all sinned and fallen short of God's glory, we have also been justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Though we are wretched sinners, there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. During the most trying episodes of our life we can be sure that all things work for our good and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Then comes the "therefore." Since all this is true and "in view of God's mercy," Paul writes, "**Therefore, I urge you...to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.**" (12:1) The time for bringing animal sacrifices to the sanctuary is over. Our response to God's mercy is to offer *ourselves* to him—all of us—our time, our gifts, our possessions. He wants all of us.

But what does that mean, practically speaking? It's easy enough to sing, "Take my life and let it be, consecrated, Lord, to thee," but what does a life consecrated to the Lord look like? Paul helps us answer that question when he writes, "*We have different gifts according to the grace given us.*" We are members of one body, but it's still true that each of us is unique. Just like my body has different members, such as the eyes, the heart, or the arms, and each serving different purposes, so we who are members of Christ's body each have different gifts. We consecrate ourselves to God when we faithfully use the gifts that he's given us to serve him and other people.

Paul names seven spiritual gifts here. He could have named fewer—or more—but the seven he names here are vital to the functioning of the body of Christ. He says, "*If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith.*" This very likely means that if your gift is for preaching God's Word, then be sure to preach the true Christian faith revealed in the Scriptures. "*If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage;*

*if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.*” The little word “if” reminds us that not everyone has all these gifts. The Holy Spirit decides how the gifts are distributed. But each of us has at least one gift that can be used to serve God and serve other people. The point here is to identify our individual gifts and then look for opportunities to use them. This can involve some experimenting. It can also be helpful to talk with fellow Christians who know us well about what they perceive our gifts to be. Some of the gifts, like preaching and teaching, may require a call from the congregation before we use them in the congregational setting. The apostle Peter sums it all up for us when he writes, **“Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.”** (1 Pet. 4:10)

So how are we doing? Are we rolling heavenward with each part doing its work, like a finely tuned BMW 745Li racing down the highway? Or are we more like a car that badly needs a tune-up, missing on some cylinders and backfiring intermittently? Is the use of our gifts characterized by diligence, faithfulness, cheerfulness and generosity—or by something less than that? The truth is that because of sin there’s no congregation that makes perfect use of the gifts of all its members. Fear or selfishness or laziness on the part of those who have the gifts can pose a problem. And sometimes the congregation is at fault for not enabling people to develop or employ their gifts. The result is that on this bicycle built for 300 that we call St. Peter Lutheran Church, at any given time only a couple dozen are actually pedaling. That makes for slow progress. And it means that we, like every Christian and every body of Christians, have reason to repent of our poor stewardship when it comes to spiritual gifts.

As the message of God’s mercy works in our hearts, however, changes can take place. God’s grace enables us to break out of the mold that conforms us to the self-centered pattern of this world. The love of Jesus at work in our hearts transforms us and provides both the motivation and the power for putting our gifts to use. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not only the power of God for salvation, but it’s also the power of God for faithful, cheerful and generous use of our gifts. With God’s mercy clearly in view, we offer our gifts as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

As the apostle continues in this section of Romans, he moves from the subject of spiritual gifts to the subject of fruits of the Spirit. The difference between gifts of the Spirit and fruits of the Spirit is that gifts of the Spirit are distributed as the Spirit determines, everyone can produce the fruits of the Spirit in increasing measure as we grow in the faith. A person may lack the gift of teaching or leading, but he or she can still grow in love and in the virtues that flow from it.

## **2. Bearing fruit in every good work**

As you read the first 11 chapters of this letter, it couldn’t be clearer that we are saved by God’s grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Earlier in this

letter Paul wrote, **“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.”** (3:28) Later he wrote, **“However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.”** (4:5) In chapter 5 of Romans it says, **“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** (5:8) Our good works play no role whatsoever in obtaining our salvation. Our salvation was obtained by Jesus through his holy work: his obedience to the law, his innocent death in payment for our sin, and his rising to life again. We are saved by grace and not by our good works.

So where does that leave us? Should we go off and sin with wild abandon in an effort to use up even more of God’s super-abundant grace? Paul asked a question like that in Romans 6: **“What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?”** But in the next breath he answered his question. **“By no means!”** Buried with Christ through baptism into death we died to sin. How could we possibly desire to keep living in sin? Good works are definitely not the means by which we are saved, but, in the language of Romans, they are the sacrifice that the saved present to their Savior God. Paul writes in one place, **“Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life.”** (6:13)

The apostle is addressing our new self here in chapter 12, the part of us that desires to serve the God who rescued us from death and hell. Here he puts in concrete terms what it means to offer ourselves to God. He says, *“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position.”*

There’s an awful lot in these verses and it can be challenging to organize it all. But one way to look at these words is to see them as God’s guidance for overcoming three of the great barriers to getting on with the Lord’s work in our personal lives and in our congregation. The first barrier is selfishness. Time and again in this section Paul reminds us that we aren’t in this alone; we’re in this together. Three times he uses the phrase “one another”: *“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.” “Honor one another above yourselves.”* And *“Live in harmony with one another.”* Christianity was not designed with the solo artist in mind. Christianity is all about community. God brought us together in this body so that we can work with each other, serve each other, and help each other on the way to heaven. God’s grace primes the pump from which generosity and sharing and hospitality flow.

Another barrier to doing the Lord's work is apathy. I think we all know the feeling—or the lack of feeling. It's an absence of passion, be it for God's Word or for his work or for the pipeline to his throne called prayer. Lest we grow comfortable with our lack of passion, the Lord says, "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord." The best method of restoring the zeal God wants to see in us is rest, rest of the physical variety and rest of the spiritual variety. There are times when the pace of our lives leaves us feeling physically drained. And it's at those times when we're most susceptible to becoming spiritually wrung out, too. God knew what he was doing when he ordained a weekly period of spiritual and physical rest for his people in Old Testament times. In New Testament times God treats us like grown-ups, allowing us to devise our own times of rest. And, lest we neglect it, our Savior invites, "**Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.**" (Matt. 11:28)

One more barrier to getting on with the Lord's work is immaturity in the faith. If we're not hearing and learning God's Word, it won't be surprising that we lack the strength to make God-pleasing choices. The Christian life is challenging enough for the mature: remaining joyful in hope and patient in affliction, blessing those who persecute us. For the immature such acts of faith are extremely difficult. Statistics can be used to say a lot of things, but the statistics for the past year in our congregation, while they reveal numerous blessings, also indicate decreasing participation in Sunday school and Bible class. Now the goal is not just improved statistics, but spiritual maturity, so that everyone from the leaders of the congregation to the preschoolers are on a path of consistent spiritual growth through regular hearing and learning of God's Word and through regular attendance at Holy Communion. This is God's way of strengthening us to serve him and each other.

"We must all hang together," Ben Franklin said to the signers of the Declaration of Independence. The alternative was to be punished for treason. We Christians, too, are to "hang together," not from fear of punishment, but from a desire to use the gifts God has given us to glorify him for the gift of his Son. And as we bear fruit in every good work this "hanging together" becomes not a burden, but a joy. Amen.