W Thomas – 13th Sunday after Pentecost Sermon
St. Thomas Episcopal Church Oriental NC – 08-23-26
Transcript

You'll notice as I preach and then as I celebrate at the altar, I have a small habit. When it comes time to start the prayer of consecration, before I say, the Lord be with you, I say these words. The Apostle Paul wrote these words for the church in Corinth.

The cup of blessing that we bless, is this not the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is this not the body of Christ? Because we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. And the whole idea for doing that is to remind you and to remind me that we are but one body, one body of Christ. And if you listen carefully to the way we have heard of the Apostle Paul write, especially in the letter to the Romans today, that is clear.

And so to work our way through this notion of what it is to be the body of Christ in but a few minutes, I believe this sermon explores how we belong to one another as many members with many gifts, that as one body with God's help, we can make one another stronger. In my own sense of how I understand who we are as a body of Christ, I simplify that statement to simply say, we belong to one another together with God's help, we can make one another stronger. And you've heard me actually say that before.

And so that kind of fits into the notion of what it is to have many members, many gifts, and one body in one place. Now, I'm going to show you something that is actually a pun. And if you pay close attention, you may enjoy the pun I'm about to demonstrate physically.

Okay, you ready? All right, so if you're able, I'm going to pull my chasuble back a little bit. You see my arm? My arm is held out outward. And as I hold my arm outward, it's kind of perpendicular to the ground.

And you'll notice that as you go up from my hand, okay, through my elbow, right up here to this joint, which connects my arm to my body. All right, you'll see that it's connected to the body. Did you know, this is the pun, are you ready for this? This is called a member.

When you lose the member of your body, let's say you're on a fighting ship in the Napoleonic Wars, and the cannonball has come through, and the surgeon's got to take your arm off, you lose a member. And it's cut away from your body. So the joke is, this is a member, it's attached to the body.

And I'll say since I am right-handed, this particular member is really important. And if it disappears from my body, I am in a lot of trouble. And when you think about the full nature of who we are as the body of Christ, that all of us connected with all our many gifts to be able to provide for one another, you think about what it's like for us to be the Church, the Ecclesia, the group that gathers to be the body of Christ.

And this is where we've got to be careful all the time. Sometimes we get confused and think the Church is the building. How often have you heard this sermon? The Church is not the building.

We are the body of Christ, hence another way of saying the Church, and it's our job to be inside or to be outside. Okay, last week you heard me talk about the prayer of self-dedication. I didn't tell you that that prayer is written by Archbishop William Temple, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury during World War II when he died.

And he is also known for saying this, *the Church is the only institution that comes together to serve not its own members, but to serve others.* And if you think about that, our gifts are to go out as Jesus did and care for all those who are about. So now we get to ask the question of what are the gifts that we have, since we've established that we have many members.

What are the gifts that we have, and how do you begin to figure out your gifts? Well, there's a wonderful resource by Lloyd Edwards that I found maybe 20 or 25 years ago called *Discerning Your Spiritual Gifts.* And in that book, he takes the reader through, and the congregation I serve in Tuscaloosa, we've done this a number of years in a row. It worked out very, very well to help us figure out who we were as the body of Christ, the many members coming together to support and make one another stronger.

How would we understand who could do what? As Paul writes in, I made notes because it included Bible study, and if I didn't write it down, I'd get it wrong. All right, he writes about gifts quite often. We heard the one in Romans 12.

He's in 1 Corinthians 12. And of course, the famous passage in Ephesians 4. And if we wanted to spend a lot of time doing Bible study and listing all the various gifts, and who has this and who has that, and Paul reminding us he is the least of all with a number of them, which says a lot about Paul when we think about it. And if I'm not careful, I can fall into the same trap of worrying about my own humility.

And I like Paul giving me that warning every time he writes about this stuff. But when we get right down to it, who helps you figure out what gifts you have? Now, I know one gift already in this congregation. It shows up in what you might call coffee out.

And I see lots of food. Not only are you good providers of food, but many of you are good makers of food. And then I also note there's this big basket over here filled with cereal or whatever.

You're also provider of food for others. So there's a way of extending that out into the community. So that's a gift of the congregation made possible by the many gifts from within the congregation.

One way, and this is one of Lloyd Edwards' great gifts in figuring this out, is to think about who are your heroines or heroes. Now, they don't have to be physical real people. You can find heroines and heroes in fiction.

You can think of people who you've read about, that you say, gee, if I could emulate that particular person, or that person is a lot like me when I'm at my desk, or in some of those characters, that person is a lot like me when I'm at my, or yeah, thank you for saying that so quickly. Yes, they're all there. And I know as a kid, when I was 12 years old, I discovered the author Rex Stout.

Rex Stout is the author of the Nero Wolfe series of mysteries. And as a 12-year-old, to discover these mysteries, it was like, wow, there is Nero Wolfe, the detective, who was a fat, large detective with an intellect beyond huge, who would not leave his brown stud in New York City. But he had Archie Goodwin, the handsome man about town, who could go out and do his laboring, that was trained to use his mind as well as he could, and they worked together as a team.

And I discovered in reading these books that if I could emulate some of Nero Wolfe's thinking patterns, and some of Archie Goodwin's approach to dealing with life straightforward, and making sure that ethical boundaries were still met, it was a great gift to me. And so that became a formative example of a hero for me. So I throw that out to you.

You can play with that as you think about who it is. And you can find heroes and heroines and people who've written prayers, you've seen them in action in the world. It's just a great way to go about it.

But if you're having trouble doing heroes and heroines, I'm kind of going to leave you with another piece of wisdom that I found first in Lloyd Edwards' book, because he quoted the author Frederick Buechner. And I've never heard

Buechner's quote before. Boo on me for never finding it before, because it's in his book *Wishful Thinking*.

And basically what Buechner is asking is this question. ***The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger. Where your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger.***

Now, when Buechner is writing about this in Wishful Thinking, he talks about doctors who are doing work that is really hard. They may be on an island somewhere in the Pacific dealing with lepers. And that is work that meets the world's deep hunger.

But if the doctor is there under duress, not particularly happy being there, and it doesn't fill that doctor's deep gladness, do you think the person being cared for is going to feel fully embraced by the healing process? No. And so maybe while they're doing the greatest good, they're in the wrong place. So the trick is, can you identify where you feel the most fulfillment, the most joy? I see a musician in the back of our room, and I can tell that musician when all of a sudden we are making music, more so than just playing the piano.

When we are making music, a deep gladness emanates out of that piano. All of a sudden, the deep gladness meets our deep hunger to not sing with the iPad, however creative that wants. So I am grateful for that particular example as well.

So here we are. We're in a place where we are the body of Christ. Believe it or not, while the room seems somewhat sparse, that's not a truism for this congregation.

All the gifts that we need to do whatever God is calling us to do are placed right in front of us. The members have those gifts. We but have to listen carefully to discern them and find them as God is yearning us to discover them.

And when we discover them, we'll then find our best passion and our gladness both individually and corporately. Because truly, we do belong to one another. Together with God's help, we can make one another stronger.

All these words I offer in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.