

Sermon for January 24, 2016 (Epiphany 3, Year C)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Psalm 19; Luke 4:14-21

Title: The Greater Honor

My sisters and brothers: I am a big fan of the Holy Spirit!

I mean it: I love the Holy Spirit and I love to feel the Spirit's power and presence.

It has often been said that the Holy Spirit is the forgotten Person of the Godhead. Perhaps there is some validity to that. We speak quite often of the Creator and of the Savior, but not very often of the Holy Spirit who is at work in the world and in the church even today.

Well, in our readings this morning, there is no way to miss or overlook the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Luke, we discover our Lord filled and empowered by the Spirit.

"Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, returned to Galilee...And he found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me'" (Luke 4:14,17-18).

In Paul's letter, we discover that we ourselves are filled and empowered by the Spirit! "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body ... and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Do you think it is possible for you and me to believe with confidence that we are actually and really filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit in the same way that our Lord Jesus was?

That's a bold claim, but it grows right out of Paul's teaching to the young Church in Corinth.

It seems that these Corinthian disciples really struggled with pride and vanity and comparative ranking among themselves.

Over and over again, Paul is knocking down those who think too highly of themselves, while also building up the more lowly and commonplace disciples.

In this great teaching about the Body of Christ, Paul is at it again.
“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’” (1 Corinth. 12:21).

There have been far too many attempts over the ages to read into these words and interpret the proper reference for each body part.

Who are the eyes? Who are the feet? Who is the ear or the nose?

One of the most creative interpretations that I have seen stated that the apostles must, of course, be the teeth of the Body of Christ!

They are the most presentable – being easily seen by all and publicly noticeable.

And they are the ones that ensure the proper feeding of the whole body.

After all, the teeth determine what food gets in and what is kept out, and they make sure that the good food which the body needs is properly chewed and ready for digestion.

This is great imagination, but it has nothing at all to do with Paul’s actual point!

The analogy of the body was quite common in Greco-Roman circles in the first century.

However, here we find that amazing Holy Spirit speaking through Paul in the writing of this letter and turning the entire analogy around on its head!

Greek and Roman writers used the analogy of the body to mollify the lower classes, telling them that there were the feet and hands of the city or society, while the senators and the educated elite were the eyes and ears and mouth.

In their arguments, the superior classes served the most important functions within society, while the lower classes served the more basic functions. All are necessary, of course, but all need to accept their place within the social order and not seek to take the position of those above them.

This was a form of the caste system. It was classic Roman social doctrine with which the disciples in Corinth were quite familiar.

They must have been a bit shocked, however, when they first heard Paul's letter read aloud and discovered how he used this same analogy to turn their ordinary way of thinking upside down!

Can you see how revolutionary this claim is? "God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member..." (1 Corinth. 12:24).

What does it say? That GOD gives greater honor to the lower functioning members of the community?!

That is an amazing claim to make!

And do you know what is even more astounding?

That ever since this letter was written around the year 54 AD, hardly any group of believers anywhere has ever put it into practice!

If ever we needed proof to show that Western societies like America are not actually "Christian" nations at all, then here it is! Because we most certainly do not give greater honor to our inferior members.

Can you even imagine a society in which janitors, school cafeteria workers, garbage collectors, nursery care workers, plumbers – a society in which people with these functional roles are given the greatest honor within the community?

I mean, really, let's face it: we could all live perfectly fine without lawyers and real estate developers and stock brokers, but we could not live very well without people who take care of the cleaning, who do the dishes or take out the trash!

And yet, we all live our daily lives as if that plain and simple fact were not self-evident! And this charge holds true here at Saint Mary's as well. I can prove it!

Do you know who Roy Packard is?

If you don't, Roy Packard is the name of the man who cleans our buildings for us here at Saint Mary's. And I'm sure he would be shocked to know that I was speaking about him from this pulpit!

Roy takes out our trash. Roy sweeps and mops our floors. Roy cleans our toilets and makes sure that we all have toilet paper to use.

If you don't know Roy, you should. In fact, he is one of the most important people here at Saint Mary's, because he performs some of our most important tasks.

You all do just fine when I'm away on vacation, but what would happen if Roy didn't show up each week? No doubt, there would be some serious trouble!
And yet his name does not show up on the cover of our Sunday bulletins.

But "on the contrary," Paul wrote, "the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable."

My friends: can you even imagine a community where this way of thinking was put into practice in real and concrete ways?

In October, the pastor of a community church in Ohio was teaching his congregation about generosity and how acts of kindness can affect others.

As they finished this teaching series, the congregation at Sycamore Creek Church near Columbus took up a special offering to be given away as an act of sheer generosity. Do you know what they did?

They called Domino's Pizza and ordered a small pizza for \$5.99 to be delivered when they were gathered together for worship.

A young woman delivered the pizza. The pastor called her up to the front – thankfully, she was not too freaked out or terrified to do this! – and right there he gave her the special tip.

It was the cash which the congregation had collected for that very purpose.
It was \$1046.

This was an act of generosity, and it was designed to demonstrate the joy that comes from generosity.

But think for a moment about why it seems so unusual and strange.
Does a pizza delivery person actually deserve a \$1046 tip?
Of course not, right?

Well, does the CEO of Walmart actually deserve to get paid 550 times more than the average Walmart employee?

It depends on how you measure worth and determine value, doesn't it?
Don't worry, I'm not talking about minimum wage laws here.

I'm talking about how WE actually measure worth and determine value, and how WE choose to show honor.

And the great good news, my friends, God measures in a different way!
There is no meritocracy with God at all. God gives generously to each one.
Not exactly in the same way. Each person is given different gifts.
But each one is gifted by the SAME power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

With a loud YES, Paul affirms that the Holy Spirit has filled YOU and has given YOU a special gift. Baptized into Christ, YOU have been empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Is it possible for you and me to believe with confidence that we are actually and really empowered by the Holy Spirit in the same as Jesus?

Yes, it is. But only if we learn to see with different eyes. And to measure worth and value in a different way, in God's way.

When the Lord Jesus spoke to the people of Nazareth, he said these amazing words: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

That day! Right there in Nazareth! Right in that small country town of Nazareth that nobody cared about. Among a people forgotten, shoved aside, walked on by the rich and the powerful and the important ones.

Right there, among those who seemed to be weak and poor and so unimportant, God chose to act.

Will you believe it that God the Holy Spirit chooses to act today in and through you, filling you and empowering you with gifts needed right now in the world?

Believe it. Act on it. And live as the Body of Christ in the world today. Amen.