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The Third Sunday after Epiphany 2022

1 Corinthians 12: 12-23, 26-27 – Luke 4: 14-21

There is trouble in the church these days. You can see the symptoms in decline, and division. If the church in the USA was just keeping up with population growth we should be opening up 3,000 new congregations each year, but the reality is we are closing more than 2,000 annually. Not only are we loosing congregations but we are loosing seminaries, and seminarians.....You feel the pinch as you are looking for a new pastor to take over when Pr. Don finally retires, and the candidates are not exactly lining up at the office door. And then there is the division, with more denominational splits, and theological differences than we can even imagine, with no end in sight. NOW these are just the symptoms, the real disease is something far deeper, something that has to do with Jesus, and how every congregation, knows him, follows him, and makes him known to others.

Maybe you think Good shepherd is exempt from these troubles, because you are vital and growing, and you have a good pastor so all is fine, but at best you are symptom free.....Mind you Pr Don did say you were the perfect Lutheran Church, or was it the best Lutheran Church in Canandaigua. In any case since you are not suffering, but not exempt from the disease, let's listen to what the scriptures have to say about being the kind of vital, healthy congregation that you should be.

We can start with the matter of Spiritual gifts.

Whenever Paul talks about Spiritual gifts he is talking about the assets of the church for fulfilling the mission of God, so take note. I have never served or known a congregation that could have used MORE money to fulfill their vision, and I have never served or known a congregation that could not have put more people to work in accomplishing that mission, but I have also never served or known a congregation that did not already have enough spiritual gifts to accomplish the mission that God has given them to accomplish, and that goes for tiny house churches, and mega churches.....The gifts are there because God has given them.....The problem is that sometimes those gifts are not identified, and sometimes they are not in their proper relationship to God or to other gifts.

When I was a young fellow I was challenged by my pastor to train as a preaching deacon and I did so, then I preached a couple of sermons and that same pastor sat me down and told me that I needed to consider going to seminary.....I told her she was crazy but she persisted, and got me to seminary, and 42 years later I am retired after serving multiple congregations. Shortly after I was ordained I was working on a synod worship committee that was planning a series of teaching events, and a fellow pastor said DANIEL, you should do this..... But I said I am no teacher. Now Pr Ken had known me since I was a kid so he KNEW ME, and I took his word to heart, and discovered that I have a gift of teaching.....

Now add to this the realization that pastors are not the only ones that have spiritual gifts. ALL of God's people are gifted people. Some of you know what your gifts are, and some of you need to have others identify, call out and put those gifts to work in fulfilling God's mission.

So imagine if you looked at every member of this congregation and began to ask what gifts you see in them, what bits and pieces of their being help you see Jesus. AND THEN, rather than keeping that vision a secret, you actually TOLD THEM what you see, identify their gifts, because at my house on Christmas morning the one thing you will not find is an UNOPENED CHRISTMAS GIFT, every gift has been opened, the floor is covered with ripped wrapping paper, and those gifts are being used, enjoyed, and put to work.....

What if Good Shepherd unwrapped ALL of the gifts that God has given? How might God's mission in this place grow? How might the crucified and Risen Jesus be seen EVERYWHERE, in EVERY FACE, in the work of EVERY HAND and FOOT, and Heart, and MOUTH, and MIND?

Then there is the matter of employing those gifts in the right ways, so that the whole body works together in a way that is coordinated and functional.

To start with whenever Paul lists spiritual gifts, he is NOT offering disciples a shopping list, as if we could choose to be the head or the mouth, as if you could choose the gift of healing, or teaching or administration. The gifts are given, and then used together for the benefit of the whole body. Here Paul's organic image of the body is helpful, because we can clearly see the absurdity of a body with the hand where a foot belongs, or an ear where the mouth should be, but can we see the wonder of a body that is healthy and able to engage the world in the kind of UNITY that makes Christ known.

Let me lay a challenge before you that is practical, and maybe necessary. You are about to begin the shared effort of building a house for Habitat. A great project that I hope to share in with you, because I am a carpenter and a stained glass artist. But beyond the bricks and mortar and boards and paint, you will be identified in this community as the body of Christ building up the body of the larger community. How you work together. How you welcome neighbors and strangers into that effort. How you disagree and let your differences show. All of that is this congregation's opportunity to bear witness that you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

And that brings us to Luke's Gospel where Jesus has been at worship in his hometown synagogue, read the lesson from the prophet Isaiah, and preached a memorable and incredibly short sermon. The sermon is sort of the Gettysburg address of the Gospels.....**TODAY THIS SCRIPTURE IS FULFILLED IN YOUR HEARING.....**

A few years ago I was invited to Zimbabwe Africa for a month long teaching mission. It was a great opportunity and a great experience. Part of the schedule had me giving a lecture at the ecumenical seminary, that included Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian and Evangelical students.....When I finished the lecture a professor stood up and identified himself as the one selected by the faculty to begin the response to my talk....He turned to me and he said he was very disappointed in me, because now he must go home and rewrite all of his lectures on mission because of a simple quotation that I used from a German theologian Jurgen Moltmann – aren't you dying to know what few words Hoffman could have used that got him in such hot water? It was this:

“ It's not that God's church has a mission, but rather that God's mission has a church.”

Getting that relationship between Church and Mission, God's mission and our work is **CRITICAL** for understanding just who we are and what we are called to do in any time and place..... Back in Zimbabwe the one tourist thing I did was visit Victoria Falls, and while there I also visited the local church that had been a mission start for 24 years. During those years they had been bounced from one vacant storefront to another from classrooms, and closed restaurants, and sometimes from a rented banquet hall.....and now we stood on a plot of bare dirt, and the president of the congregation told me how they had acquired their new “Stand” which is a building lot for their new church home.

Victoria falls is surrounded by nature preserves that protect mostly Elephants, so they are very careful about new developments, but this land had been set aside for new homes and small businesses, and the church had finally found a home, but not without great struggle. When the land was available the church petitioned for a lot, and were told they could have a lot for the cost of \$40,000 a sum far beyond the means of the church, so they replied to the city council and asked if they could make other arrangements, perhaps a loan, or a reduced price.....After 2 months the city council responded by saying we will sell you the same land, not for \$40,000 but for \$4,000 because, for the past 20 years you have been a faithful, generous part of this community helping to eradicate Malaria in our schools and homes. You have been here as an agent of hope and healing, and we want you to remain as just that.

So despite all of the troubles in the church, just imagine for one moment, what kinds of stories might be told about Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in the days to come, when you begin to make known that in this place, God's mission has a church, a church full of gifted people, ready to do the work of ministry in the name of Jesus Christ.

AMEN