

“Part and Parcel” based on 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13 and Psalm 104:24-35

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Pentecost, May 28, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

My wife Claire gets frustrated when I say this, but 1986 may have been the best year of my life. Now, I know, I should say the year we were married, but we lost an election that year and I lost my job. Or perhaps I should say one of the years our kids were born, but having kids is hard! So, for me, while I fully acknowledge my life has only gotten better since, it's easier, and funnier to say that my life peaked at just 8 years old.

You see, I remember some amazing things from that year, and since I was so young, I have no recollection of any major negatives that take away from my positive memories. The first big memory from that year was when my father won the New York Lotto...Ok, he didn't win the jackpot, but had a second or third place finish, and won a few thousand dollars – that was a real windfall in 1986. And on that night, when he announced it to the whole family, he told us that we would be going to Disney World. This was the only vacation of my childhood that wasn't tied to seeing family, travelling for my brother's baseball, or something work-related. It was amazing.

The second major amazing thing was, of course, the Amazin' Mets winning the World Series. Now, the Lotto and Disney World won't help us understand our readings today. However, my hope is that the band of misfits that were the 1986 New York Mets might illustrate for us aspects of the church that Paul describes. That's because this team maximized each flawed player's unique gifts in such a way, that these World Series Champions, who won 108 games in the regular season, were far greater than the sum of their parts. They participated and thrived in something that was far bigger than themselves.

Now, whether you are playing soccer or baseball, or even performing in a musical, your coach or director, if they are good, wants a little bit of what the 1986 Mets had. I don't mean the clubhouse drama, but by this, I mean they are hoping to put each person in a position to succeed. They want to create something that achieves far more than might be expected from a group of limited, flawed, or even troubled players.

There are two ways to build a team, one is by collecting the most talent available – hello New York Yankees. Or you can build a team by cultivating the players you have. At the high school level, the second option is all you have available to succeed, and great coaches find their players and put them in a position to be the best they can be. These players then get recruited as All-Stars and go on to play for college teams or end up on stage at the Blumeys and a musical theater program.

Each of the three young men we heard from this morning for Senior Sunday can likely identify with this. Yet with all the great lessons we can learn from team sports or musical performances, often the team takes a back seat when the stars realize their individual talent and stand out.

Now, that 86 Mets had only one hall of famer – Gary Carter, the catcher. sure, there was a former MVP in first baseman Keith Hernandez, my favorite player, but he arrived humbled when the Cardinals traded him for a sandwich and a bag of chips. His former manager believed he cared more about himself than his team, walking out of practices to smoke cigarettes or do crossword puzzles in the locker room.

Also on the team were outfielders Lenny Dykstra and Darryl Strawberry, and pitcher Doc Gooden. They were as talented as any of their peers in that era, including those who are in the Hall of Fame. And in 86 they were still young and hungry, trying to show what they could do. This was before they became stars and eventually crashed, in jail and in rehab. Now, I'm not going to go up and down the whole roster here, though I could, as there are plenty more examples of top-notch players with huge flaws. No, my point here is that despite their flaws, their differences, and the challenges each of them faced on and off the field, none achieved as much in their careers as they did for just this one season. Imagine what could have been if they had remained humble.

The church Paul is writing to in the city of Corinth had its share of superstar caliber talent. But the church was struggling under the weight of internal conflict and power plays. The whole letter in our bibles deals with division caused by selfish individuals, who think that what they think, what they do, and what they have to offer, makes them better in some way, or excuses the wrong things they do, or makes them more important to the function of the church. When Paul was with them for a year and a half before, perhaps this church was a well-oiled machine, but now he is responding to reports, that he has received from members detailing the turmoil and strife.

Paul responds by encouraging the church to look at all things through the lens of the gospel. By this, he is not pointing to a list of rules or a particular teaching, but a proclamation, namely that the God of Israel has been revealed to the world in this person Jesus. He says this is foolishness to the Roman world to have a crucified Messiah or King, because anyone shamed on a cross could not be deserving of honor. And Paul says the crucifixion is downright scandalous to Jews, because not only is anyone hanged on a tree cursed, but Paul says the man who was hanged by Rome is to be called "the Lord," the title of God. Crucifixion is beneath human dignity, and certainly, beneath God's too right?

Therefore, the lens of the gospel sees foolishness or scandal, and recognizes love in its place. Paul says the only way to truly declare that Jesus is Lord is through the Holy Spirit. This is because it is the Spirit that allows us to look past the shame of the cross and honor the one who died on it, by declaring who he is – one with God of Israel. Paul wants them to see this amazing love and let it dissolve their pride. He wants them to see this amazing love, and let freedom be submission to God's will. He wants them to see this amazing love and let their gifts benefit the community, rather than puffing up any individuals, as somehow better than anyone else.

Our graduates – Parker Dixon, Silas Hamilton, Will Hoard, Walton Moore and Dylan Steeves –are each endowed with great gifts from God that they did not earn. They are cultivating what God put in them. Likewise, every one of you in the congregation and beyond, has been entrusted with gifts that you did not earn, which God gave you to cultivate. Our challenge is to recognize gifts and when we cultivate them, to do so with humility, Not for our own benefit, our own glory, or our own honor, but use them instead to honor God, for God's glory, and for the benefit of others, not ourselves.

Paul compares each and every one of us as individuals to parts of a human body and says that despite our many parts, we are one body – We are one body, the body of Christ. Together, we are far greater than the sum of our parts, like the Amazin' Mets. Yes, despite our individual gifts and talents, every one of us is still flawed like those Met players. We make mistakes. We struggle. We suffer in this world. Yet we can use our gifts and talents to reveal God's glory, and to serve the community, for the benefit of each other.

By this, we truly become the body of Christ, where the Holy Spirit dwells in and among us. By this, you can be part and parcel of the church, the temple of God in this world. By this, we can be the amazing place where heaven and earth meet.

Beloved, on this feast of Pentecost, when we celebrate the Spirit descending on the apostles, do not be fooled into thinking this event was a one and done occurrence. No, the Holy Spirit has come down to us and it remains here with us always. Just as a parcel is something that is wrapped to be given as a gift, or sent out, so too, being a temple of God means having God's Spirit within us. It means our bodies, both individually and as the church, are wrapped around this gift of the Spirit, and we are sent out.

You are part of God's new creation, to be transformed by the Spirit and share in Christ's work. We said in our Call to Worship that all who call on the name of Lord will be saved. But salvation is more than dying and going to heaven, it is living in eternal life, right now and right here. It means living this as part of the body of Christ, and despite our flaws, both individually and in the church body as a whole. These young men and each of you are called to be part and parcel of Christ. You are his parcel with the Holy Spirit within us and among us, and you are sent to share God's love, as a gift for all. Amen.

There is one Spirit by which we are given gifts from God that we have not earned, and each one is distributed to individuals as the Spirit wills. Your job is to cultivate these gifts for God's glory, not your own, and our job together is to be the best team that we can be in the church, as temples of the Holy Spirit, the meeting place of heaven and earth.

You are even more amazing than the Amazin' Mets of 1986, but you must remain humble. For despite all the challenges, suffering, pain, and failure we face individually, we are one body with many gifts, and with the help of the Holy Spirit you all are, and can be far greater than the sum of your parts.

For just as the body is one and has many parts, now all the parts of the body, being many, are one body. So also, is Christ. For also in the one Spirit, we were all baptized, So that whether you are mighty or weak, in power or weak, you are the same, For all of us were made to drink one Spirit. Amen.