

# *Gathered in Diversity and Love*

## 2nd of 3 Church as Community

by

The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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1 Corinthians 12:12-20

<sup>12</sup>For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup>For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. <sup>14</sup>Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup>If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>16</sup>And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup>If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup>But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup>If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup>As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

## 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

<sup>4</sup>Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup>Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup>For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup>but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. <sup>12</sup>For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Episcopal priest, Martha Sterne, writes of a clergy friend who spent a long time looking for *the perfect church*. He finally found it over in England. “I can’t remember the name of it,” she writes, “but it has a huge endowment, just buckets of money. And... no congregation.” So the rector in charge doesn’t have to deal with squirmy babies at baptisms and sick people and brides about to faint for lack of eating on their wedding day. The leader of that church does not have to be a sensitive pastor to highly opinionated people, or grumpy people, or be with joyous people and anxious ones.

The real key to this so-called *perfect church* is that the people who are not there don’t have to deal with each other, get bored with each other, disagree and argue with each other. They don’t have to arrive early to get their prime seat in the pews to sit near the people they do like. And, what’s more, they don’t leave the church each week with a charge to live out their baptismal vows and make trouble over matters of justice, show kindness to strangers, serve the poor or worry over their town and figure out how to create equity and fairness everywhere they look. Not in that *perfect church* – with no members! Martha Sterne goes on, “It just has visitors admiring the stained glass windows and whispering respectfully in the aisles. The priest there just welcomes tourists passing through and doles out money for good works from deep buckets of endowed funds.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, I dare say not one of your pastors here at Bryn Mawr wants to serve that kind of church, which is really not a church at all, but rather an empty vessel of a building that might as well be called a museum. If the pandemic isolation has taught us anything, the pastors, musicians and program staff of this church love being with the people of this congregation, and journeying alongside those who *bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all the things* that life dishes up along the way.

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<sup>1</sup> Martha P. Sterne, All Saints Church, Atlanta, “Baptism of the Lord.”

The long season of virtual ministry, and now this slow emergence, has called forth creative skills and energies to engage and interact with one another, but we have really missed the interactive, in-person community that the church is meant to be. So having had limited in-person encounters with one another these last two years has us thinking deeply about what we value in being part of a gathered community, what it really means to be the church.

The word church in the New Testament is derived from the Greek word, *Ekklesia*. When we break down the syllables of *Ekklesia*, the meaning we derive from its parts is “to call out from and to call to.” The Greek word for church then is a noun, made up of a verb and directional prepositions. At its core meaning, church is a word that describes movement. A church is a group of people called out from one place and to another. It is an assembly or a congregation called together. That word *church* is used one hundred fourteen times in the New Testament to describe the Body of Christ in the world. And no one likes to use this word more than the Apostle Paul.

As you know, Paul had an encounter with the Risen Christ, and long before Matthew, Mark, Luke and John even began writing their gospels, Paul started sharing his conversion story. Paul traveled around preaching and teaching the gospel, founding churches, and sending letters back to them when he moved on to gather another congregation together. Quite unlike that so-called *perfect church* Martha Sterne’s friend sought to find in England, Paul’s churches were filled with diverse people, from various religious experiences, representing different socio-economic stations in life. And from the sound of First Corinthians they did not get along with each other at all.

Now, perhaps it goes without saying, that First Corinthians 13 is a lovely reading for any couple, their family and friends to hear on a wedding day. Those timeless vows promising to love one another “in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health,

as long as we both shall live,” take flight on the wings of the biblical affirmation that “love never ends.” However, Paul was not writing these words for two people madly in love with each other and bound together by marriage. Paul wrote these words for the church, the broadly diverse congregation called together from such different sorts of people they found it very hard to love each other.

First Corinthians 13 makes no sense apart from the words that precede it in Chapter 12. There is no dividing line, no turn of the page, nothing separating 1 Corinthians 12 and 13. These more familiar words about love, about being patient and kind, and never boastful or arrogant or rude were addressed to people in the church who had sorted themselves out, with some claiming to be more important than others, with some saying they were more spiritual, wiser, and more gifted than others. The church needs all of you, says Paul, so bind your diverse selves together in love so that we can be the Body of Christ – the hands, feet, voice and heart of the incarnate presence of God in the world.

We in the church are individually called, blessed with spiritual gifts, and have unique leanings toward serving in certain ministry areas, but we are never really the church apart from the celebration of our differences; for it is our diversity that really defines us as a community of faith, hope and love. What an amazing thing to live into in this time of conflict, division, and divisiveness, with rising racism, anti-Semitism, and incivility that is defining our culture, our community and the world at this moment! Counter to so much fraught human interaction we see these days everywhere we look, in the church, diversity is needed, celebrated and bound together in love.

Today, despite the pandemic, and despite the Nor’easter potentially threatening to freeze us out, we will pause in this hour of worship to dedicate our newly renovated spaces. Before we get to words of reflection and thanksgiving and prayers of dedication, these scripture readings locate all the planning, the fund-raising, the construction, and renovation in a biblical, theological context. This whole massive project

– from the reimagined spaces in and around the Education building, the expansion of the Memorial Garden, the renovation of the Ministries Center, the reconfiguration of classrooms and offices, and the building of the new Atrium, all of it, was about creating a more welcoming, more accessible and more inclusive space to gather as the church. Did we address decades of deferred maintenance like those old Gym windows that looked like they might rust out completely and fall to the ground? Of course we did. But this major church campus renovation was never just about the buildings. It has always been led by a vision for being the church – the diverse, intergenerational community of God’s people gathered in order to be sent out in faith and service.

It has been many years since urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg started writing about the need for any healthy society to be centered around three basic places: family, work, and a “third place” that is an open and inclusive social setting. Oldenburg’s work continues to influence much of the urban development today. He argued that the third place be a neutral territory, frequented by a core of regular attenders who foster interpersonal exchange, and are always open for others to be welcomed in. Historically, these gathering spaces have been vital to their communities., whether they be a well in the village center, A post office in a small town, the pub or coffee house in a neighborhood, or a building that houses a congregation, this third place is essential to the spirit of individuals and the health of community, where conversation is central and free-flowing, where rank is forgotten and where democratic ideals are valued.

Many contemporary theologians have also used Ray Oldenburg’s astute observations about urban spaces as essential keys for nurturing Christian community. One of them, Martin Marty, wrote: Diverse people who gather in congregations awaken to the full meaning of sanctuary: a place marked by the presence of the Holy One who always speaks up for the poor, the infirm, the oppressed, the orphan, the widowed. That sense of sanctuary is best experienced as a safe place where everyone is covered by the promise of God’s providence, where impossible acts of

protection and provision are still expected, where all manner of people find human community life-giving as an oasis of *shalom*, of peace, of wellbeing. Marty goes on to say that such a space gathers people in to be embraced, in order to send them out into the world to do the hard work of making peace and advocating for justice and showing compassion until it hurts, only to return again to the church to be loved, cherished and strengthened to be sent out again, and again.... and again.<sup>2</sup>

Today's Dedication of these newly renovated buildings really has little to do with the buildings... It has everything to do with being the diverse people of God gathered together in love so that we may be sent out as the Body of Christ into the world God so loves.

AMEN.

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<sup>2</sup> Paraphrased from Martin Marty's *Perspectives in Context*, August/September, 1997.