

Life Sunday Sermon 2021

1 Corinthians 12:22-27 “From Invisible to Indispensable”

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In our sermon text today from 1 Corinthians 12:22-27, the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth: “²² On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, ²⁴ which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, ²⁵ that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it”¹ (1 Corinthians 12:22-27).

Corinth was the most important city in Greece during the time of the Apostle Paul. Its strategic location on the Greek isthmus gave it control of east-west trade routes, brought great wealth into the city, and exported its culture throughout the world. Corinth was filled with over 1,000 shrines and temples, with the Temple of Aphrodite standing on top of an 1,800-foot promontory. Philosophers waxed wise in their pursuit and pontification of knowledge. The Isthmian Games were held in an 18,000-seat stadium. Corinth was a center of commerce, culture, religion, philosophy, and entertainment in the Roman Empire! Just as the city was pressed into a narrow four-mile strip of land and surrounded by the Aegean and Adriatic Seas, so the church found itself “pressed” by the surrounding waves of the ways of the world.

1. The wisdom, word, and way of the world.

The Corinthians loved “winners”! In all pursuits, they wanted to come out on top, and they wanted everyone to know! It was a self-centered culture. Pride, power, possessions,

¹ *Holy Bible*, ESV, 1 Corinthians 12:22-27.

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pleasure, prestige, and position were sought after in Corinth. There was a clear and visible distinction between the “haves” and the “have nots.” The city was filled with “invisible” people: slaves, the lower classes, and those who struggled to find a safe and secure place in society. Those who were viewed as an unnecessary burden on society were “disposable” at the whim and word of those in power.

The unborn and newly born were clearly invisible to the conscience of the empire. The Greek philosopher Plato writes of Socrates’ instructions, that “children of inferior parents, or any child of the others that is born defective, they’ll hide in a secret and unknown place, as is appropriate [to be eliminated].”² Furthermore, regarding children unwanted by their parents, he writes, “they should be very careful not to let a single fetus see the light of day.”³ Aristotle recommended that parents be lawfully compelled to eliminate weak or unwanted infants.⁴ Roman philosophers readily followed suit. Cicero (106-43 BC) wrote, “Deformed infants shall be killed.”⁵ Deformed could mean having an abnormal formation, being sickly not the desired sex, or simply being unwanted by their parents. Seneca (4BC – 65 AD) would also write very causally on terminating the life of an unwanted child.⁶ It was simply the way of life in their world.

We would like to think that we are far wiser and have advanced far beyond those dark days, but our world also has struggled to understand the value of life that either appears to offer little potential to society, or is simply seen as disposable due to our prejudices and fears. During

² Plato, *Republic*, Book 5, 460 BC

³ *Ibid.*, 460e-461c.

⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 7.1335b.

⁵ Cicero, *On the Laws*, 3.8.

⁶ Seneca, *On Anger*, 1.15.

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World War II, the Nazis had a phrase—“life unworthy of life”—which justified the elimination of any life that did not fit into their vision of a master race. Life that was of a different race or culture, different sex or political ideology, or was feeble or frail, infirm or impoverished, deformed or disabled was deemed “life unworthy of life” and viewed as disposable, unvalued, and unnoticed by the world.

In our own nation, as one traces the dark history of Planned Parenthood, one quickly discovers the deep-seated belief in eugenics which harbored discrimination and racism. It especially targeted the poor and those of African-American descent. Just recently, statements formerly only whispered in secret are now declared in public as even a state governor called for the right to infanticide in which a child after being born, “will be kept comfortable, while the mother decides whether or not to terminate the child’s life.”⁷ Into the context and culture of the world, St. Paul writes to the church in Corinth, and to us in our present world, about the life-giving wisdom, word, weakness, and way of God.

2. The wisdom, word, weakness, and way of God.

Early in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, St. Paul had written that God, in His wisdom, was willing to look foolish in the eyes of the world, “For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”⁸ “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe”⁹ (1 Corinthians 1:18, 21). Furthermore, St. Paul writes, “But God chose what is foolish to shame the wise; God

⁷ Governor of the State of Virginia, 2019.

⁸ *Holy Bible*, NASB, 1 Corinthians 1:18.

⁹ *Ibid.* 1 Corinthians 1:21.

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chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong¹⁰” (1 Corinthians 1:27). It is the divine way of God to turn things upside down and outside in in order to make them right side up and inside out. Like something being turned over and shaken out, God wants to empty us of our self-centeredness, self-sufficiency, and self-reliance. God wants to break us of our pride in order to remake us as His people. He wants to remove our exterior facades and expose the sin of our hearts in order to heal our souls and help us to live from the inside out, as Spirit-led followers of Jesus.

In order to do this, Jesus, the divine Son of God, became man in the incarnation as the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us ... full of grace and truth”¹¹ (John 1:14). Jesus embraced the weakness of human flesh and was fully man and yet fully God. For nine months, the Son of God became “invisible” in the body of the Virgin Mary. For the majority of His earthly life, He was “invisible” in the eyes of society as He dwelt among humanity, but with His glory veiled. He was neither recognized, known, nor received, as the Apostle John wrote in his Gospel. The ancient prophet Isaiah predicted this in saying, “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces, He was despised, and we esteemed Him not”¹² (Isaiah 53:3).

It is the “theology of the cross” which looks foolish to the world, but in which “Christ who is beauty itself became ugly by identifying with sinners so that humans made ugly through sin might become beautiful in God’s eyes.”¹³ He takes our ugliness and makes us beautiful. He does this out of His divine and “overflowing love” in which He loves us not because we are

¹⁰ *Holy Bible*, ESV, 1 Corinthians 1:27.

¹¹ *Ibid.* John 1:14.

¹² *Holy Bible*, ESV, Isaiah 53:3.

¹³ Mark C. Mattes, *Martin Luther’s Theology of Beauty* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2017), 70, 91.

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beautiful, but in which, because of His love, we are made to be beautiful.¹⁴ In the foolishness of God, Christ is willing to be shamefully displayed on the cross, in order to bring us out of darkness and into His marvelous light and give us eternal life. This is the “theology of the cross.” The mighty Creator became a child. The sovereign God became the suffering Savior. The One worthy of all honor was humiliated on the cross. This is the way of God.

This certainly was NOT the way of the Corinthian world, but God had called these Corinthian believers to faith and to new life in Christ. Now they were also being called to live out that new life by seeing their world through the lens of Christ’s love. They had been called internally into God’s love, and now they were called to live out that love externally to their neighbor. They were to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind, and their neighbor as themselves. In doing so, they would see the invisible and they would serve the weak.

3. Seeing the invisible and serving the weak with honor.

This had been a struggle for the church in Corinth. They had created divisions as they rallied around their own leaders and self-focused agendas. They championed their own abilities, positions, advancements, and prestige. They had neither the time to wait for each other, nor the humility to serve one another. But St. Paul reminds them that they are one in the body of Christ, the church! “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”¹⁵ (1 Corinthians 12:12). Their self-centered boasting was the equivalent of a hand, foot, eye, or ear each thinking that it was the most essential member of the body. But as St. Paul exclaims, a healthy body would not be

¹⁴ Ibid., 111.

¹⁵ *Holy Bible*, ESV, 1 Corinthians 12:12.

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composed of just one member. If so, it would simply be a worthless pile of eyes, or ears, or feet, or hands. How absolutely foolish! There are no members which are unimportant or dispensable without harm coming to the body or the body suffering limitations in its functions.

St. Paul notes that, “On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another”¹⁶ (1 Corinthians 12:22-25). Every member, every part, every person is purposefully created and handcrafted by God. King David, the psalmist, declared, “For You [God] formed my inward parts; You knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise You for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are Your works; my soul knows it very well”¹⁷ (Psalm 139:13, 14).

Today, we live in a world, like Corinth, where human life is valued and measured by its position, power, possessions, or potential. But God has declared that from the moment of conception, human life has worth and value because that life has been created directly and intentionally by God and ascribed worth by God. Life is worthy of life because of the Author and Giver of Life!

In our nation alone, over 60 million preborn lives have been snuffed out, not even seeing the light of day. To most, they have simply been invisible casualties of a culture and society

¹⁶ Ibid. 1 Corinthians 12:22-25.

¹⁷ Ibid. Psalm 139:13, 14.

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driven by many different pressures. Furthermore, the ethical slope of human valuation of life is slippery. In the 1970s, philosopher Dr. Francis Schaeffer warned the United States that if abortion was legalized, it would lead even to infanticide and euthanasia. He was scoffed at and criticized, but it turned out that he was right. In 2013, in Pennsylvania, after years of practice, Dr. Kermit Gosnell was finally convicted of infanticide. The simple “snipping” of the spinal cords of those already born had become too easy for the calloused practitioner.

In the Netherlands, the elderly are afraid to go to the hospital for fear of being euthanized. Iceland recently announced that they had nearly eliminated Down syndrome from their nation. Had they found a cure? No! They had made sure to terminate all pregnancies which had the potential of a child with Down syndrome. There is a strident move in our nation in that same direction. But, rather than “erase,” God calls on us to “embrace” every life He gives as a cherished gift. In our nation, there has been cultural pressure on some to view their life as disposable and without value. Their worth has become invisible, even to themselves. We must speak up for their life! We must speak life to them! In Proverbs 31:8, God commands, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.”¹⁸ Presently there is ongoing litigation as the Center for Medical Progress exposed the harvesting and selling of fetal organs. In a travesty of injustice, the courts have found those who exposed the violence against the unborn to be the guilty party—rather than those who sold the unborn on the research market. May God help us to see and to serve the invisible and the vulnerable members of the human race.

¹⁸ *Holy Bible*, NIV, Proverbs 31:8.

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Our world is filled, not only with those whose voices are unheard, but also with those who often suffer in silence and whose burdens are invisible to those around. Thousands of Christians are imprisoned for their faith, and many go on to disappear in death without the world even noticing or giving an account. We need to speak up for justice. There are those who carry heavy burdens of shame over having had an abortion, or having pressured another into one, or even having performed one. We need to speak clearly and compassionately about God’s mercy and grace, love and forgiveness. To those who struggle with infertility, we need to offer our support and prayer. To single parents who are stretched to the breaking point to care for a child, we need to offer our tangible care and assistance. To those who are homeless, without jobs, lonely, or alone, we need to make space and provisions for them in our midst and in our hearts. Our text reads that upon our “less honorable” parts, we are to “bestow greater honor.” We need to bring forth those parts which are unnoticed and invisible in the shadows. We must honor them and make a place for them. Our text also reads that our “unpresentable parts” are to be treated with “greater modesty.” Those parts which are private, fragile, and vulnerable, we need to cover with protection.

We are certainly called to see and to serve our invisible and weaker brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. As much of a challenge as this might be in our culture today, it might be an even greater challenge for us to be seen and served by the invisible and weaker members of the church, the Body of Christ.

4. Being seen by the invisible and served by the weak in humility.

One of the biggest challenges in missions is when those bringing visible resources, professionalism, and services fail to see that those “being served” also have viable resources to

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bring to the table, personal experience to offer, and ways to serve that are important, even if unrecognized and unrewarded. Too often we might be good at serving others, but struggle to see how we are needy and weak as well and need to be humble enough to be seen and served by those we often overlook!

There are many pastors, who, if they are honest, must confess that there are times when bringing their children with them on visits to those in nursing homes, and places of assisted living, and so forth have found that the children had the greater ministry. Sometimes the mere gift of a child’s presence was more meaningful than the pastor’s many words.

I think of a pastor who had a child whom he called his “Triple A” son. The boy had apraxia of speech (struggled to speak), he had autism, and he had food allergies that were life threatening. And yet in spite of all these challenges or perhaps precisely because of them, it was this child that had a profound ministry upon a large church that needed the unpretentious, unrestrained, and unconditional love that this child freely and joyfully gave to all. He may have been seen by many in our world as disposable, but his ministry in the body of Christ was indispensable! The father had considered leaving the ministry because of the burdens of his son, only to discover that it was the blessings of his son that enhanced the ministry!¹⁹

Henri Nouwen, after having been a professor at Harvard, chose to spend the last years of his life at Daybreak, the L’Arche community in Toronto among those viewed as “handicapped” by society. Nouwen wrote, “So I moved from Harvard to L’Arche, from the best and the brightest, wanting to rule the world, to men and women who had few or no words and were

¹⁹ Rev. Steven Carlson, Pastor of Ruthfred Lutheran Church in Bethel Park, PA.

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considered, at best, marginal to the needs of our society.”²⁰ He went there not out of pity for them, or because they were in need of his great service, or professorial wisdom, or of the many books he had produced, but rather because he needed them. He saw his brokenness and his need for healing and wholeness. It was there in that place, and by being humble enough to be ministered to by them, that he received shelter and God’s healing for his weary soul.

It is God’s divine economy that in the body of Christ, we are called to see and to serve one another. We are to love, honor, and care for our brothers and sisters. We are to suffer with and celebrate with each other in Christ. St. Paul writes, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together”²¹ (1 Corinthians 12:26). This is who we are and how we live in the church. This is the way of Christ. We live together in Christ, and this is the witness of the church before the eyes of the watching world.

5. The way of Christ and the witness of the Church to a watching world.

The early church was known for its love of life, both of its own members and also of all others.

Early church father Tertullian (c. 160-225 AD) recorded the reaction of the Romans when they witnessed the ways of the Christians: “‘Look,’ they say, ‘how they [Christians] love one another’ (for they [Romans] themselves hate one another); ‘and how they are ready to die for each other’ (for they [Romans] themselves are readier to kill each other).”²² The way of Christ and the way of the world were in vivid contrast! The difference was life and death. Tertullian also wrote of how Christians rescued the tiny babies who were thrown upon the trash and dung

²⁰ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p. 11.

²¹ *Holy Bible*, ESV, 1 Corinthians 12:26.

²² Tertullian, *Apologeticus* ch. 39, sect. 7.

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heaps of Rome and raised them as their own children or gave them a decent burial if they were already dead. Their love for life extended to all.

Even the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate (331-363 AD) readily admitted that it was the Christians who saw, served, and cared for others. He lamented the progress of Christianity because it was pulling people away from the pagan Roman gods. Julian declared, “Atheism [he called Christianity “atheism” because Christians did not worship idols, but rather a “god” they could not see!] has been specifically advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the godless Galileans [Christians] care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them.”²³

Today is the day for the church to continue to boldly stand up and to see, serve, defend and celebrate God’s gift of life! As we live our lives in worship of God, we give our lives in service of others. In the body of Christ, the strong stand in solidarity with the weak, the healthy care for the sick, the powerful protect the powerless, and those with honor and recognition give honor to the overlooked and the invisible. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we affirm the worth and value that every life has been given by God. Every life has meaning, purpose, beauty, and place, and each is to be visible and indispensable in the creation of God. This is the way of Christ. This is the way of the cross. This is the witness of the church to the world. Amen.

²³ St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Contra Julianum*, (St. Cyril writes, quoting Julian the Apostate).