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August 27, 2017 – Proper 16

Text: Romans 11:33-12:8 (NIV)

Doxology

33 Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and[a] knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!

34 “Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?”[b]

35 “Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?”[c]

36 For from him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.

A Living Sacrifice

12 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Humble Service in the Body of Christ

3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. 4 For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. 6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your[d] faith; 7 if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; 8 if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead,[e] do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Footnotes:

Romans 11:33 Or riches and the wisdom and the

Romans 11:34 Isaiah 40:13

Romans 11:35 Job 41:11

Romans 12:6 Or the

Romans 12:8 Or to provide for others

When I think back to my high school years I mostly wish I could just have those 4 years of my life back to spend in some other way. I know some people really enjoyed their time in high school. They made good friends that have lasted all their lives. Maybe they met a sweet heart who later became a spouse. Maybe they found the career path they always wanted and

went confidently off to college or trade school and have been loving life ever since. I'm a little envious of the people that were like that because my experience didn't include any of that. I did have a few friends in high school, one good friend and a couple that I hung out with occasionally, but I had more good friends outside of school than in. The career path and the sweetheart thing didn't happen at all.

So there were some really good things that I could have found in my high school experience that just didn't happen. That was bad enough, but there was a lot more going on in school that made everything worse. So much drama. Looking back at it, it's a wonder any of us survive high school. I was in a relatively small public school and I wasn't really interested in all of the drama going around, but you couldn't help hearing all of the gossip and seeing the fallout of this or that.

Part of the problem is all of the cliques. You had the jocks and cheerleaders, you had the partyers, the potheads, the science geeks, the band and theater folks, and the crazies. There are probably some other groups in there too that I'm forgetting and different schools had different groups. None of the groups generally mixed well. The jocks did their sports stuff. The partyers were off getting drunk. We science geeks were reading books, and so forth. It was pretty rare for someone to bridge two cliques. The interests of each group tended to be so different that you wouldn't want to be in more than one.

Whenever those groups would encounter each other, there was the tendency for each to make the other miserable, to the best of their ability. Some groups tried to avoid confrontation, but most would antagonize anyone who wasn't part of their group. The end result is a pretty dysfunctional group where just about everyone is trying to tear down everyone else and no one gets the support they need to flourish and thrive unless they are somehow immune to the bickering or they escape from it.

So no, there isn't much I miss from my high school days, and, even though I didn't really know what to do with myself, I was very happy to go off to college. Sadly, the drama doesn't end when you leave high school. You're able to isolate yourself a little better from it, since there are more people there doing the same kinds of things you do, same interests and aspirations. At the same time, everyone else is able to gather together in similar groups as well. The antagonism might not be there so much, but the support isn't there either. Antagonism turns more to apathy as each group simply doesn't care much what others do. It's only if their activities start invading

your space that you react, often negatively.

The trend toward isolation and antagonism continues beyond college. We keep to like-minded individuals and look down on people in other groups or at least avoid them. Whether you're in high school, looking forward to high school, or years beyond high school, that tendency is a part of who you are.

It seems like this sort of thing should be behind us when we're here in church, but it isn't. The church is full of all different kinds of people. We have teachers, we have pray-ers, we have socializers, we have workers, we have people of all sorts of interests and abilities, and we don't mix very well. We allow ourselves to occupy the same space, but that doesn't mean we interact. We're like a jigsaw puzzle fresh out of the box sitting in a pile, each of us a piece. We're supposed to fit together, but someone looking at us might be hard-pressed to tell that at a glance. Most of us are isolated, connecting once or twice to this person or that, those that have similar interests, but the rest are outside, separate, unconnected. You may not be actively antagonizing them or they you, but you may not be all that concerned about supporting them either.

Whether you're in high school now or if you can think back to those days, I want you to imagine a different kind of high school. All of the jocks go out of their way to encourage you in sports, they help you learn the ropes and work with you to improve and enjoy the various physical activities the school has. The science geeks help tutor you in all of those problem areas like physics, chemistry, trigonometry, and calculus. They take something that's unintelligible and find ways to explain it so it makes sense and you can get a handle on the subject. The musicians invite you to pick up an instrument and play with them. They are happy to practice with you as long as it takes for you to get comfortable with your instrument of choice and they make sure you always have a place in the band. The partyers too, maybe they aren't so much about getting drunk as they are helping you to get out and about now and then. They make sure to check in on you and see how you're doing. They never want you to feel like you're all alone.

When you graduate, you'll still have the particular skills and interests that God has given to you, and you may not find you're a math whiz or an all-star athlete, but you'll at least have gained an appreciation for all of those things and made friends who are happy to share their skill and enthusiasm with you. A school like this would produce students who are a little bit better at everything, and are better adjusted and confident as well. A school where every student supports everyone else would be a beautiful thing and couldn't help but produce students who are happier

and more successful at anything they worked at.

Our unwillingness to care for and support others who aren't in our immediate circle here is what takes the church that could be and turns it into the church that is. Each of us has particular gifts that God has given them, and we have particular interests we enjoy sharing with others. We seek out like-minded individuals and rarely go beyond the group we are comfortable with. There is little unity in a church where each individual only concerns himself with his own cares. Each of us is here not only to be with God but to be with each other, to build each other up, to offer our gifts in the service of your brothers and sisters here who do not have the same gifts and talents.

This is not the church God intended or the one Christ came to create. The church is the body of Christ, where each member fills his appointed role and, in so doing, supports the work of those around him in their roles. Looking at even the brief list St. Paul shares, we see that each is important. Prophets have always been tasked with relaying the word of God to the world outside. There has always been a need for those who enjoy serving others in all sorts of ways, whether in acts of compassion, or more physical labor, those who are simply willing to lend a hand and help out those in need. Those who exhort or encourage have the gift of picking up those who have fallen on hard times. Kind words and a comforting presence are vital to those who cannot manage the grief and the hardships that face them. There are those also who need encouragement to avoid temptation and stay on the path of righteousness. Those times when we neglect our better judgment and dabble in things that will end up hurting us, we need someone to sound the warning for us and wake us up to the danger. There are those who contribute. God has blessed some richly with wealth and resources and it is their privilege to share what they have been given to further the cause of God's kingdom. Then there are the leaders, those who provide structure and organization to our efforts. Whether they be the people at the top of the ladder or those who merely oversee a few, those who do their work cheerfully and help everyone's efforts to fit together have been given a special gift as well.

Christ is building a wonderful thing here in his church. Setting aside the divisiveness that comes from our sin and looking closely at what he has made of us, we'll see the model of what God wants for the world. God's grace brings us here together. The body and blood of Christ are laid out for us at the table as Christ's forgiveness erases the boundaries between us. We share in the same table as one people, the athletes, the socializers, the craftsmen, the musicians, the

wealthy, the caring, the compassionate, the wise, and all of the other gifts and abilities all next to each other. One people, bound together in Christ.

Each time we share the table with our neighbors, we take on the form of that perfect community that comes from the absence of sin and the abundance of God's grace. Our lives begin and end here at the table. We become God's people here, made into the body of Christ as we partake of Christ's own body. As we are made into Christ's body, we carry that life and purpose with us. God gives us gifts to use in building up his church, first inside and then outside.

So look around you and remember that all of us here are part of Christ's body, regardless of where we come from or what our interests are. Take the time today to reconnect with one of your brothers or sisters who you haven't talked to in a while. Ask what you might be able to do for them, even if it's just to offer a prayer for their wellbeing. This is what God's kingdom looks like, a life lived every day with the mutual support of every other Christian, the encouragement, the leadership, the instruction, the comfort, the compassion and every other good gift. This is what he wants to share with the world and it all starts here around the table of grace that Christ calls us to.