

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

I have to admit to being somewhat embarrassed, if not a little shocked, at the Gospel story this morning. Compared to the careful and ambiguous hints that comprise most of Jesus' words, listening to him in Luke's account is like being hit by a sledgehammer. Gone is the quizzicality of the Jesus who asks 'who do you say I am?'. Gone, too, are the unanswerable puzzles of the parable teller. Instead of the indirect communication so beloved of theologians here we see Jesus playing his day's equivalent of a reality tv contestant. And like the exhibitionists and fame seekers of so much atrocious television, Jesus does everything he can to make himself the center of attention. To be sure, it is all somewhat embarrassing. And subtle it most definitely is not.

But then Jesus wasn't trying to be particularly subtle. And it is not really with the denizens of reality television to whom we should be comparing Jesus. Rather we should be viewing his actions in the temple as on a continuum with our contemporary obsession with quantification.

We all know how teachers, police and college administrators just to name a few live and die by the numbers. From test results to arrests and admissions, there is a bottom line, and that bottom line must be met. The problem of course is that the metric for quantification ends up becoming not a means to understanding but an end in itself. So we have teachers who teach the test rather than their students. And we have police more interested in upping the number of trivial arrests than fighting serious crime. In British universities humanities scholars are being asked to show the real world impact of their research or lose funding. When you are an expert on

medieval literature or the history of the nineteenth century it is hard to put a cash value on the worth of your research.

The fact of the matter is that when Jesus tells the people that the scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing he too is anticipating those who question the cash value of his ministry. He is not some flighty here today gone tomorrow itinerant preacher; rather his ministry is the real deal – the very fulfillment of the scriptural yearning for one to complete God's purposes. While I may have reservations about quantifying something as abstract as the coming of God among us, at some point that quantifying had to be done. Jesus needed to pass this test and the passing needed to be on the public record. But it was a means to an end, not an end in itself. Once done, from then on Jesus is more interested in others working things out for themselves.

This is why today I encourage you to reflect less on that Gospel and more on the reading from Corinthians. The model of the Corinthian body that we find there is a much more helpful way of viewing what God calls each one of us to do. For in Corinthians we are reminded that while our faith is centered on a historical Jesus it is more truly about how we locate ourselves within the Christian body today. However good our understanding of New Testament Greek, and however impressive or knowledge of the scriptures, we will know nothing of Jesus unless we look first to our role in his body here in the twenty-first century.

In a way the life and message of Jesus is like a centrifuge. A centrifuge that is not moving, or one that is not separating its contents out from the center is no good to anyone. If Christ is at the center of our faith, the Christian centrifuge works when it spins

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Christians out from what centers them and into the wider world. Which is exactly the point of the Corinthian body. Although we find ourselves connected to one another, we do God's work not in the motionless stasis of reverent prayer, but in engagement with the ever changing world.

It has been said that nostalgia is like grammar lesson; you find the present tense, but the past perfect. I think many of us are drawn to Christianity for similar reasons. We are aware of the tensions of daily life, and we yearn for some of the perfection that resides in the past. The problem, however, is that Christians cannot be nostalgic. While nostalgia may be the drug of choice for those who are tense with the present the significant tense in a Christian grammar is not past perfect but rather the future perfect.

Paul's Corinthian body reminds us that we all have an important role in making the future perfect. And by perfect I mean that each of us is asked to submit to the continual process of changing our lives under the perfecting guidance of Christ. To be sure none of us will find ourselves perfected this side of eternity, but that is absolutely no reason to cease striving for divine perfection.

One of the great strengths of the metaphor of the Corinthian body is that we are reminded that God desires us to transform ourselves in a way uniquely ours. Unlike the simple steps to fulfillment so beloved by tele-evangelists and self-help books the Christian church knows that there are as many ways of being perfected in Christ as there are members of the body of Christ. The same path is not the right path for all of us. And what may be a life-giving ministry for one of us may be absolutely destructive of another.

This means that no preacher can tell you where the Christian centrifuge may be spinning you to. With God's help you will be able to find the answer, and it will one way or another involve you in the kind of good works that Jesus announced that day he read from the scroll. Each of us is called to help Christ bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and to let the oppressed go free. But each of us must discern how we do that for ourselves.

Yesterday I was at the Dartmouth Ski-Way for the eighth annual Special Olympics. I had the joy of seeing hundreds of special needs youngsters and adults gather for a tremendous opening ceremony. It was my honor to lead the invocation, but there were hundreds of others who had volunteered their day to help the special Olympians. High School and College Students, parents and alumni, paramedics and police, teachers and college officials were all there helping the Special Olympians. Alone no single person could have made such a transformative event possible. But together, and with their various gifts, it was a glorious example of a secular version of the Corinthian body, with hundreds gathered in service to others.

I know that not everyone is called to such work (certainly not if you get cold easily) but I do know that when we help others we reap infinite rewards. In selfless love, and in generosity of spirit, Christ is released from a prison of nostalgia and made vitally present once more. If we are to manifest Christ in the world we have to commit mind, body and spirit to the task. For without the wholehearted involvement of each of us in the world the Christian body becomes skeletal and spectral. But where we commit ourselves physically, intellectually and spiritually, then we can make good on Christ's gospel promise to perfect the world. Amen.