

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
January 24, 2010  
Third Sunday after Epiphany  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Nehemiah 8:1-10  
Psalm 113  
I Corinthians 12:12-27  
Luke 4:14-21

Dizzy Dean was one of the most colorful players ever to play professional baseball. He grew up the son of a poor sharecropper in Oklahoma. After a stint in the army, he was signed to a professional baseball contract with the St. Louis Cardinals organization in 1929.

In 1933, Dean won 20 games for the Cardinals and led the National League in strikeouts. In the first game of the 1933 season, he set a now-broken modern league record by striking out 17 batters in one game.

The following year Dean pitched the Cardinals to the pennant, winning 30 games and losing only 7. The Cardinals went on to win the World Series.

Then in 1937, Dizzy's career took a bizarre twist. While pitching in the All Star Game, a batter hit a line drive that hit Dizzy on the little toe of his left foot, fracturing it.

A few weeks later, Dean tried to pitch again with his foot wrapped in splints and an enlarged shoe. But the pain in his little toe forced him to compensate and to adjust the way he delivered the ball. He was never the same again, and to many observers of the game, it was the undoing of his great career.

Now certainly the apostle Paul never met Dizzy Dean, but Dean's injury and experience would have been of great interest to Paul, especially in his attempt to show believers at Corinth the true nature of the Church.

Paul frames his discussion of the church by using the metaphor of the body to describe the church and how it is to function in the world. The body of Christ, he says, is made up of many parts playing different roles, but all are important and significant.

What's more, the church is a body so uniquely bound together by the Holy Spirit that when one member suffers, all share the pain. When one member reaches a milestone, all share in the victory. We may be many in number. But we are one in the bond of the Holy Spirit.

One of the ways the enemy often tries to discourage us is by getting us to focus on other "parts of the body," on other believers who have different gifts and skills and who are called to serve differently than we are. I cannot count the number of times where I have looked at someone else in the church and said to myself (God was listening in, of course): "why can't I have leadership skills like that?" Or "why can't I be more like so and so?"

These kinds of comparisons are a trick of the enemy. They encourage us to form unhealthy and unnecessary comparisons that obscure the need for *diversity* in the church. To use Paul's crass imagery: "suppose the whole body were an eye --

then how would you hear? Or if your body were just one big ear, how would you smell anything?”

And so to all of us, in those times when we feel like our gifts are small or insignificant, when we feel like “little toes,” Paul says: “some of the parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are really the most necessary” (v. 22).

In the short story entitled *The Juggler of Notre Dame*, author Anatole France tells of a juggler who traveled through France in medieval times, plying his trade at fairs and other events. He would unroll his rug, lie on his back, and juggle various objects with his hands and feet.

He was very skilled and made a good living doing this. In time, though, he grew old and weary. He became ill and retired to a monastery to recover. Once he recovered, the monastery granted him permission to stay.

This particular monastery was dedicated to the service of the Virgin Mary. Each monk brought before Mary gifts that represented their respective talents. These varied from illuminated manuscripts to offerings of flowers and fine-crafted works of art.

The juggler, however, had none of these things to bring. In the evenings, he would sit quietly before the altar in reverent but sad silence. Finally, in desperation, he resolved to offer Mary the only thing he knew he could do well.

He began to sneak into the chapel late at night when no one else was around. He would unroll his rug, lie on his back, and juggle whatever objects were available.

One evening he was discovered by several of the monks. They were outraged at his sacrilegious actions. They gathered all of the monks together and returned to confront him. When they arrived back at the chapel, they were shocked by what they found. Mary had descended from her pedestal, and with a smile was wiping the sweat from the juggler's brow.

It can be easy to believe that our gifts are somehow less significant than others. Or we can be tempted to think that spiritual gifts consist primarily of those things that are done only when the church gathers for worship.

But such thinking is misguided. It's possible for persons to use their gifts in ways that are largely unnoticed or unseen by the rest of the body. But the body would suffer -- and perhaps die -- if those gifts were removed or not used.

We are living in a society where all things have become dispensable. Even human beings. If you don't perform at your job or add value to your organization, you are dispensable and can be replaced.

But not in the church. Not in *this* place. Not among God's people. Not the body of the living Christ. For even as the Holy Spirit anointed Jesus to preach the Gospel and to bring the Kingdom of God to earth, the church is anointed by the Spirit so that we may be an extension of Jesus and continue his work in the world.

We are now his hands, his feet, his voice. We are *many*, but we are *one*. We are not one because I stand up here and preach a sermon and try to encourage everybody to “all get along.” We are one because God has made us one, and because our very survival comes from our *interdependence*. To live any other way is to reject his call on our lives.

As we come to the Table this morning, I remind you of who you are. You were made by God on purpose, for a purpose. You are a conduit. God has love he wants to give to others through you. God has lives he wants to bless and touch -- through you! You are indispensable! You are *who* you are for a reason, and you are here at Epworth for a reason.

As you receive the bread and wine this morning, receive them as God’s Word to you that you are *indispensable*. You are not merely necessary or functional. You are indispensable to the Kingdom of God, and to the ministry here which seeks to be an extension of Jesus in the world.

So receive these gifts -- and the grace that comes through them -- with joy this morning. And then let that grace empower you as you fulfill your role in Christ’s body.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.