

**Sermon: January 24, 2010**  
**Third Sunday After Epiphany**  
**Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21**

### ***THE CHAMPIONSHIP SEASON***

One thing most of you probably don't know about me is that I was a starter on a boy's volleyball championship team while I was in High School.

Now that may seem hard to believe given the fact that I am of average height and boys volleyball players are usually much taller than I am. And boys volleyball teams weren't played on an intramural level until long after I graduated from High School. So how can that be?

Well, the truth is that the championship was the result of a summer tournament while I was at camp...music camp to be exact! I attended the Illinois Wesleyan Summer Music Camp I believe in 1971. It was an opportunity for musicians from all over the state to come together to participate in the choral, orchestral and symphonic band programs.

It was a tradition at this camp, that a volleyball tournament would be held with the eight boy's cabins competing against each other: one game each – double elimination.

It was given that the tournament would be won by cabin five – Counselor Bob's cabin. Counselor Bob's teams had won the tournament for as far back as anyone could remember. Somehow, Bob seemed to end up with the oldest and tallest members of camp. I was in cabin one – Counselor Jerry's cabin.

By luck of the draw, our first game in the tournament was against cabin five. And it wasn't pretty. The boys of cabin five seemed so much quicker and more aggressive than we were. They had something like a 12-0 lead before we scored our first point. The final score was something like 21-5.

That dropped us into the loser bracket – where we got to play the other cabins as they lost. Fortunately, we were much more successful in the loser's bracket. You could say we found our rhythm. That allowed us to march through the loser bracket unscathed; which meant that we had the privilege of playing the undefeated cabin five once again.

Given the outcome of our first game against cabin five – nobody gave us a chance. In order to win the tournament – we would have to beat them twice and everyone knew that counselor Bob's team never loses.

Well, the Cabin One team that played them this time was a much better team that played them at the beginning of the tournament. We had discovered that it took teamwork to be successful. Each of us had discovered that we had particular gifts or abilities that supported this team concept. I for one discovered that I had a wicked

overhand serve that came across the net like a knuckle ball. And what we gave up in height, we made up for with increased quickness and improved communication.

Having beaten us decisively already at the beginning of the tournament, Cabin Five clearly took for granted that they had this tournament in the bag. In the first rematch, we beat them something like 21 – 16 which meant that we had to play them once more. This time they did not take us for granted and came out fired up. But we were able to withstand their increased attack. We stayed together as a team and were able to beat them by two points. For the first time that anyone could remember, Counselor Bob's team had lost a tournament. Cabin One, Counselor Jerry's team (my team) were the champions.

Now perhaps with the passage of time, I have managed to embellish this story or forgotten some detail. However, the fundamental lesson to the story is true. To be successful in any team sport, you have to play together as a team.

The Chicago Bulls, for example, had a superstar in Michael Jordan for several years before they began to win championships. What turned the corner is that Coach Phil Jackson got them to believe in the team concept. Sure Michael Jordan was the star – and on most nights would score the most points. But everyone else on the team played an important role. As a team, they won six championships in the 1990's.

That is the same message that Paul is trying to share with the Church in Corinth in our Second Reading for today. Corinth was a thriving cosmopolitan city located not too far from modern day Athens. As a result of its location it had a lot of economic and political power. A young growing Christian community had been established there nurtured by a number of Christian evangelists, among the Peter, Paul, and the lesser known Apollos.

When Paul wrote his first letter to the members of the Corinthian church, he was well aware that they were a deeply divided community; having split into factions. They were divided over who was their favorite apostle. Some were followers of Peter; others were followers of Paul, still others Apollo's.

They were also divided between rich and poor. They argued over communion practices, the eating of food sacrificed to idols, and the admissibility of sexual relations outside of marriage. Some members even took others to court over an issue of immorality. They even had a dispute over the Christian doctrine of the resurrection.

Paul's letter seeks to address some the issues over which they were arguing and admonishes them to reclaim their sense of community. Last Sunday we heard Paul tell them that each of them has been given gifts by the Spirit to be used for the common good. In our lesson for today, Paul tells them that they are all members of one body – the body of Christ.

Just as every part of human body is necessary for the benefit of the whole, each individual is essential to the wholeness of the body of the church that gathers in the

name of Jesus Christ. It needs the gifts of each person, even those who feel unimportant, or are deemed to be unimportant by others. Because we are one body, we know that if one member of the body suffers, all suffer. If one member of the body is honored, all rejoice in that honor.

The idea of this oneness does not negate our individuality. But rather than setting individuality as the primary goal of being, we are instead to value the importance of each individual being a part of the whole body. In order to be effective in communicating the good news of God's love and salvation shared with us through Jesus Christ, we must understand our connectedness to each other and to Jesus Christ.

The struggles that Corinthian faith community faced in the early years of Christianity are not too unlike the challenges that church face today. On the national level, we are part of a church that is deeply divided over issues of human sexuality. After certain decisions were made in Minneapolis last August, some congregations have threatened to leave. Still others have threatened to withdraw their benevolence support. We have yet to see what impact this will have on the ELCA in the long run.

However, not all of our battles happen on the churchwide or synodical level. It is not unusual for congregations to find themselves in disputes over many things both large and small. It is not unusual for congregations to argue over loyalties to current or precious pastors or staff members. It is not unusual for congregations to argue how money to spend or save money, especially at budget time. It is not unusual for congregations to argue over times and formats of worship. It is not unusual for congregation to argue over any number of kinds of changes.

The difference between healthy congregations and dysfunctional congregations is how they are able to minimize the incidences of conflict and how they manage conflict when it occurs. There will always be things to disagree about, that is part of human nature. But when disagreements turn to anger, when people stop listening to each other, when people begin to accuse each other, when they fail to forgive each other, when people begin to dig in their heels and hold fast to their positions, then that is when congregations become unhealthy. When these things happen, factions occur, just like they did in Corinth. And when that happens the community needs to be reminded of who they are and why they exist.

We are children of God. We are baptized into the one body of Jesus Christ. We are made one in the spirit. We are given the mission to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the one who was chosen and anointed by God to bring good news to the poor; to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19).

We are united in this identity and in this mission. Each of us has a part to play. Each of us has gifts to offer for the common good.

When congregations are healthy, when congregations keep their focus on their mission, when congregations value each member of the congregation and honor their gifts, then amazing things can happen in the name of Jesus Christ. The Spirit takes hold and individuals enjoy being part of a community that transforms lives, strengthens families, cares for the neighbor in need, and makes a difference in the world.

That is my vision for the church. We are one in the body of Jesus Christ. Let us together make a difference. Amen.