



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea**

*The Episcopal Church  
in Destin, Florida*

**THE THIRTEENTH  
SUNDAY AFTER  
PENTECOST**

**AUGUST 27, 2023**

**A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham**

What does it mean to us when Paul says, “we are members one of another?” Keep that in mind.

I read a few weeks back in the *Wall Street Journal* that young people in some Asian countries are less interested than they used to be in working in high-intensity factory settings with low wages and poor working conditions. Consequently, the employers in those countries have had to do the unthinkable: raise wages and offer benefits and perks previously most often associated with the Googles and Metas of this world, including “yoga classes, better cafeteria food, and subsidised kindergarten for workers’ children.”<sup>1</sup> Their labor costs increase, and what happens here? Our prices go up. Look at the labels on our clothes, our televisions, our shoes, our furniture, even our seafood. Inexpensive Asian labor has kept prices down here. But maybe not so much anymore.<sup>2</sup> Whatever will Wal-Mart do?

But if we are members of one another, does that mean that we are one with the arguably underpaid workers in faraway lands, and, therefore, should be relieved that they are insisting on – and apparently now being paid – a better wage?

So much for global economics, but Paul never was one to suggest meaningful distinctions among the many characteristics that we often use to differentiate between “us” and “them.” How often have we heard Paul’s bold, countercultural statement that

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “US consumers face rising costs as workers from China to Malaysia ditch ‘numb’ manufacturing jobs,” *South China Morning Post*, August 9, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/3230448/sorry-america-asia-wants-better-wages-and-wont-be-your-low-paid-workshop-much-longer> (accessed August 14, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> Galatians 3:28 (NRSV).

Are we then “members one of another” across all boundaries of geography, ethnicity, sex, nationality, race, or religion? Paul seems to know no human boundaries. Because in his view God has none:

[T]here is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!<sup>4</sup>

And what will bind us all together in harmony? One guess. That four-letter word beginning with L that rhymes with dove. Hardly a surprise. And maybe we should wonder whether paying higher prices for goods from Asian factories is such a bad thing after all.

But there is more to Paul’s letter to the Romans that we heard this morning than fair pay for hard work. What economists and sociologists would call “the division of labor.” As Paul says, “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.” And he lists a number of gifts that are pertinent to the activities and ministries of the early Church. But, of course, our gifts come to play in every dimension of our lives. It can be as simple as “Jo cooks, I clean up,” to “You load the luggage,” and “I’ll pilot the plane.”

Figuring out our gifts and aptitudes, given to us by the grace of God is not always the easiest task.

So let me share some personal stories and insights that fall into the category of do what I say, not what I did. Or in a more graceful iteration, remember that a wise person learns from their mistakes. A wiser person learns from the mistakes of others. So consider me the other.

Under peer pressure from friends – in junior high school, what a shock –, I took the music aptitude test to join the band. It did not go well, but the band director overlooked that because I would be in the eighth grade. A year or so into private trumpet lessons, my teacher told my mother he doubted I ever would be a trumpet player. And to this day a symphony quality trumpet remains gathering dust in my closet, unused since May, 1965. If there is a hell, that may be what sends me there.

When I got to high school, I took an aptitude test which showed that I should be an accountant. So I went to college as a pre-med student. That lasted until I bottomed out the curve in the biology lab practical. Starfish have one part...the star. Or was those five parts ...the points of the star.

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<sup>4</sup> Colossians 3:11 (NRSV).

Meanwhile I am reading books like Fulton Sheen's *Science, Psychiatry, and Religion*. And spending more time at the campus radio station than in my academic classes. But I did excel in the graduate level statistics class.

So I went to law school, in large part because my roommate, who was a year ahead of me, went to law school, and it seemed kind of cool. But I did end up in a 30-year career in the law of broadcasting, an industry that relied on some very sophisticated statistical calculations of audience size to quantify its advertising rates.

Remember the motion picture *Unbreakable* with Bruce Willis and Samuel L. Jackson? The Bruce Willis character is unbreakable, never sick, never injured, even in a train crash that killed everyone else on the train. He is protective by nature, but it never occurred to him that he had a special gift and a calling to use his protected status to protect others – until Samuel L. Jackson asks him whether he always awakens in the morning feeling an emptiness in his life.

And maybe not every morning, but ever so often in my life I would awaken with a feeling that something every deep and significant was missing in my life. And I knew what it was. But it was all too easy and convenient to deny. And it's not as if a number of Samuel L. Jacksons didn't challenge me in some ways subtle and not so subtle – One in particular, though her resemblance to Samuel L. Jackson is questionable. When God calls, God will be nothing if not patient... and persistent. And here we are.

Now, if my spiritual life had been more robust. If I had not brushed off encounters that in retrospect only confirmed my call to ordained ministry. If I had an outlook and lifestyle that, as Paul would say, conformed less to the world... maybe I would be celebrating my 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a priest...although I likely would have been a Roman Catholic priest, which would have seriously complicated my relationship with Jo. But, again, here we are, though, perhaps, better late than never.

I share this rather skeletal review of my life's pursuit of who I am and what I am called – and gifted, I hope – to be, because all of us always are seeking the path God has envisioned for us and for which God has equipped us with particular gifts and talents. So maybe we can avoid a life that resembles a pinball bouncing off bumpers and flippers on an inevitable journey to oblivion.

Here's what I have learned. Remember Jo's sermon on the spiritual practices that can change your life? Embrace them. They can. If we want to know what God wants, we might want to speak to God about it...and listen for an answer.

That means setting aside distractions...on a regular basis. And recognize that the guidance may come from friends, especially those who know us best.

Another late in life insight that has emerged from my ever-spotty efforts to be transformed by the renewing of my mind, as Paul would say, is the difference between satisfaction and fulfillment. Mowing the lawn to an even green carpet is satisfying...but it is hardly fulfilling for me, at least. Preparing and delivering a thought-provoking sermon or writing an edifying Gem, or presiding at an engaging liturgy, or offering sage advice and direction to a troubled soul...that for me is fulfilling.

Ironically, I also believe that conducting a symphony orchestra would be immensely fulfilling. But the necessary gifts may be lacking. My dad sang and conducted the church choir. Our youngest conducts his own musical group and makes a living in Los Angeles as a professional musician. I am still wading around the gene pool on that one.

But both my parents wrote and performed professionally in broadcasting. And they were able teachers. I managed to scrupulously ignore that for far too long. The talents of our forebears might well have a lot to say about our God-given skills and gifts. We just need to get over being teenagers in time for it to make a difference.

Whatever our age, today is the first day of the rest of our lives. Wherever we are, we all have to take a next step. May it land on the path we have discerned as "good and acceptable and perfect" in the eyes of God.