



“A PLACE FOR YOU...ON THE TEAM”

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

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Today is Kickoff Sunday at Birmingham and Berkley First. As the summer season draws to a close in the coming days and we find that the fall is upon us, many of us are captivated with football games and tailgate parties. Forgive me, but as we passed out miniature footballs last week, I just couldn't help but think that perhaps some of the best football illustrations out there come from one of the all-time greatest comic strips, *Peanuts*.

As the air turns a little brisk yet again, how could we pass up the all-too-familiar sketches of Lucy, Charlie Brown, and a football? You know how these stories go, but please indulge me once more.

One fall, the scene begins as Lucy is holding the football with point of her finger yet again. Charlie Brown looks down at her and asks, “What kind of a fool do you take me for?”

Lucy says, “I'm not trying to make a fool out of you...”

“Oh, yeah?” Charlie Brown says as he turns to walk away.

“The whole trouble with you is you don't trust anyone!” exclaims Lucy.

“Look,” replies Charlie Brown, “Every year you pull the same trick on me... You say you're going to hold the ball while I kick it, but you never do! You always pull it away and I land flat on my back! Every year you pull the same trick! EVERY SINGLE YEAR!”

“Listen, Charlie Brown,” argues Lucy. “If you're going to get along in this world, you have to learn to be TRUSTING... Anyone can trust someone who's trustworthy... I'm giving you a chance to learn to trust someone who is NOT trustworthy!”

Pondering her words for a moment, Charlie Brown eventually agrees. “You're right,” he says. “I've got to learn to be more trusting... You hold the ball and I'll kick it.” Charlie Brown walks away and comes running up to kick the ball. Right when he gets to Lucy, she snaps it up into the air as he yells out, “SHE DID IT AGAIN!”

Doing a mid-air 360-degree somersault, poor Charlie Brown lands flat on his back yet again with a “WHAM!” In the last frame, Lucy stands over him asking, “See you here again next year?”¹

I don’t know about you, but I grew up reading *Peanuts* comics and watching their cartoons on television. In every instance I found myself rooting for Charlie Brown to kick that football. Every time, however, Lucy seemed to snatch it away at the last minute. It’s a cruel trick, but Lucy just can’t seem to help herself. Year in and year out, we wait for Charlie Brown to kick that football, but every time we see it, we know how the story will end. We laugh and we cringe for poor old Charlie Brown all at the same time, don’t we? We know he shouldn’t trust her, and yet we also want to believe that maybe Lucy will change and let him kick just once.

When I was younger, I didn’t play much football. I was in the marching band. My brother was the football player in our family. I’ve watched enough games to know, however, that the one who kicks the ball and the one who holds it are both on the same team. They work in tandem with one another. A holder would never pull the ball back. He’d be working against his own team. Perhaps that’s the irony of the classic *Peanuts* story of Lucy and Charlie Brown. Charlie Brown works so hard to be a part of the team and would most likely include everybody (even Lucy) on the team, while Lucy is focused on...well...Lucy.

I wonder if there is a little bit of Charlie Brown in all of us. Somewhere deep down, we long like him to belong; to be a part of the team. We just want to do our part—to kick the ball, to make the play, to see our team succeed and to be a part of the shared success of others. Yet, like Charlie Brown, we know what it’s like when others exclude us from the team, don’t we? We know the feeling of having the ball snatched away through no fault of our own, only to find ourselves flat on our backs on the ground.

In our scripture lesson this morning, St. Paul is writing to the Church in Corinth as he reminds them that they are on the same team. It seems some have considered a few gifts or talents to be better than others. There seems to be a sort of spiritual elitism that’s happening.

Our passage begins with “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.”² Paul goes on to share with them that while there are a variety of gifts, services, and even activities, it is the same Spirit (the Holy Spirit), the same Lord, and the same God, that gives each of those to everyone for the “common good.”³ In other words, there are not individuals that are closer to God because of the gifts they have, but rather every gift is needed for the good of all. The gifts aren’t given in order to *compete* with one another, but rather so that the team might be successful in the work that God gives to the whole team. God gifts us with what is needed together, that our gifts might *complete* one another. We’re better together!

If the team consisted entirely of quarterbacks, who would receive a ball? If there was only an offensive line, who would play defense when the ball was headed in the other direction?

While I didn’t play football growing up, I did spend some time on a softball league with my brother for the Cub Scouts when we were in elementary school. I started out in the outfield. I did not like playing out there because there weren’t too many balls to catch. In fact, I’d find myself picking grass for a large part of practice. Later, they put me behind home plate as a catcher. In

that position, I had to pay attention. There was no time to write anything in the dirt around home plate. There was always action in that place.

My parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles often came to cheer us on as we played. In fact, my dad became one of our coaches early on. Although we were just learning, Cub Scouts could still be pretty competitive. Opposing teams learned from the crowds how to banter back and forth. Early on, I learned how to antagonize the batter. “Hey batter, batter! Swing!”

One day, however, our coaches came together and decided that as Cub Scouts and young athletes, we should exhibit a higher degree of sportsmanship. From that day on, no matter what type of banter came from another team, we were instructed to rise above it and be the better sportsmen.

One day while we kept quiet only to be razzed throughout the game by the other team and their fans, I can remember telling my dad how much I hated being the better sportsman. “Why couldn’t we give the opposing team a taste of their own medicine?” I asked. Dad reminded me that if we won a game well-played where we focused on being better athletes, it was far better than winning because we were able to antagonize our opponents.

I’m not so sure I agreed with him that day, but I came to understand that it really was about how well we worked together to play the game. The best part of playing the game was being a part of a team of which we could be proud.

I don’t know about you, but as I watched the news this past week, I began to lament yet again how quickly we, as a nation, get caught up in the banter against one another. In recent years, our divisions as a people have run deep against one another, whether it is in politics or religion. Yes, even in the life of the body of Christ, we’re quick to draw up our sides and stances on a whole host of issues and ideas. We make our assessments about others, their faith, and their ideas, and before you know it, we discern who is more important, more spiritual, more faithful, the better Christian, or even the true Christian.

Paul is quick to remind the Corinthians as they strive to identify those who are most spiritual in their midst that all of their varied gifts come from the same Spirit. While his list is not exhaustive, he notes the variety of gifts that God gives such as wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing gifts, abilities to perform miracles, prophecy, spiritual discernment, speaking in various kinds of tongues, or interpretation of tongues.

Can you believe it? Even prophecy is a gift. Those are the people who were run out of town for trying to speak to a new way of living to the people of God. Rarely would a prophet think of his or her calling as a gift.

Paul concludes that like the body needs its various parts, we need one another in the body of Christ. He says, “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”⁴ Like it or not, we need one another. We were made for one another. We’re on the same team!

The anthem you heard this morning was a song entitled “Home” by Phillip Phillips. I don’t know if you’ve heard it before, but the beginning words ring so true for who we are as a church in this time and place in our world’s history. Listen to how Phillips begins the song:

Hold on, to me as we go,
As we roll down this unfamiliar road.
And although this wave is stringing us along,
Just know you’re not alone
’Cause I’m going to make this place your home.⁵

At Birmingham and Berkley First, we need the diversity of gifts that make us who we are. In these uncertain times where others take up sides and decide who’s better, we’re holding onto one another with an appreciation for the diversity of gifts that we all bring to the body of Christ. We don’t all think alike. We don’t all have the same passions for ministry. We don’t have the same gifts. The times may be tough in which we live. Yet, we know that we need the variety of gifts that God gives us when we come together to make our journey. When we come together in the midst of the craziness of the world around us, we find our home, our peace, and the blessing of our combined gifts in Jesus Christ.

Bill Staines once wrote a song that Peter, Paul, and Mary helped to make popular called “A Place in the Choir.” In the refrain, he writes:

All God’s critters got a place in the choir
Some sing low, some sing higher
Some sing out loud on the telephone wires
And some just clap their hands, or paws, or anything they got now⁶

When all God’s creatures are empowered to sing their part in the choir, the music is beautiful as our world is filled with the variety that God intends for all of creation. When we come together as a team, lives are truly transformed by the grace of God in Jesus. And sometimes, the lives that are changed the most are our own as we learn to value the team that God gives us in one another, whose gifts accent our own.

Whether it’s holding the ball, kicking it, or shouting from the sidelines, your gifts make us who we are as the body of Christ! Here at Birmingham and Berkley First, there’s a place for you on the team!

¹ <https://www.gocomics.com/blog/3688/charlie-brown-s-greatest-misses-every-peanuts-football-gag-comic>

² I Corinthians 12:3b, NRSV.

³ See I Corinthians 12:4-7.

⁴ I Corinthians 12:13, NRSV.

⁵ <https://genius.com/Phillip-phillips-home-live-lyrics>

⁶ <https://genius.com/Bill-staines-a-place-in-the-choir-lyrics>