

**Third Sunday after the Epiphany
and 189th Annual Parish Meeting
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
24 January 2016**

1 Corinthians 12-31

I love movies and I love movie trailers. I am one of those people who arrive at the movies at least 15 minutes early to watch as many previews as I can watch. There was a time in my life I fantasized about being the latino “Movie Trailer Guy.” Movie trailer guy always starts with the setting of the problem in a world where something happens. From here he moves to the reality that best describes that world or setting, this is the unique feature that the plot of the movie will seek to change. After this comes a threat to that reality, someone or something is challenging the reality that is taking place in that world. Then from here, you get a few shots of key plot turns, some background music, and a list of actors who will play various roles. A Trailer then would sound like this, “In a world where men are men and all women love them, one woman will teach another woman how unnecessary men really are. Tristar pictures presents...”

I have been thinking about a movie trailer for what’s happening here today, “In a world where the church has become unnecessary in people’s lives and where all truth is relative, one group of Christians in rural Louisiana still believes that in Christ sin has met its match (Cue dramatic music). Tristar pictures Brad Pitt, Meryl Strip and Shia Labouf in a tale of death and resurrection for the whole family.” I think this would be a good trailer. We can then have a few shots of our coffee hours, nursing home and Angola ministries, a shot of Mrs. Sharon cleaning the kitchen, another of Mrs. Dixie surrounded by an army of volunteers setting up for the next hospitality banquet, and a shot of the vestry chasing each other with pointy knives in a locked room. Of course, now we need Brad Pitt to play me, (Maybe Danny DeVito would be more appropriate). Meryl Strip to play Mrs. Anne Klein, and Shia Labeouf to will play Fr. Peter. I think this will be an amazing movie. I would pay to see it. Wouldn’t you?

All joking aside, it is amazing that we are gathering here today to celebrate 189 years of life in this location, in this town, and in this state. Our church has survived a civil war, two world wars, conflicts in Vietnam, Korea, Afghanistan, Iraq and other places. A number of recessions and economy downturns. Restorations, building campaigns, and natural disasters like hurricanes and severe storms. We have weathered changes in leadership in the Diocese and we have lived through all the theological, doctrinal, and philosophical struggles of a denomination that has become the poster child for liberal Christianity. We have endured the loss of great leaders, the anxiety of membership drops, the joys of membership growths, and the beauty of cycles of near death followed by cycles of great resurrection. We have endured and we have thrived. And through it all, we have remained true to the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth, the only Savior of the World, the universal truth for all people, all ages, and all places. We have gathered week after week because we believe in a truth that is larger than our own individual lives, moods opinions, and theological predispositions. We believe that Jesus Christ is the truth, the way, and

the life, and that he came into the world to save sinners. This truth is a powerful truth worthy of celebration. This truth is a powerful incentive to get up in a cold morning and come to this building to do the transformative work of being the church here and now.

As we celebrate our anniversary, we are reminded by Paul that we are the church together, each of us. We are an interdependent organism, where each of us plays a fundamental role, regardless of age, gender, socio-economic status, or position within the church. Together we form a unity that is beautiful and fragile. A unity that must be protected and celebrated. Today we read Paul's words to the Corinthians, words that apply to us and our context. Apparently, the church in Corinth had developed a natural hierarchy of those who were considered important and those considered less important, and this hierarchy had to do with Spiritual gifts. Those who spoke in tongues were at the top of the food chain, while other gifts, such as church organization and administration were considered less important.

Paul counters these divisions and false hierarchies by stating that it is God's Holy Spirit who bestows a variety of gifts to his people, in accordance to God's will. Some are given the ability to utter words of wisdom by the Holy Spirit, some are given the gift of faith by the Holy Spirit, some are given the gift of prayer for healing by the Holy Spirit, etc. Paul lists all of these gifts and adds in every case "by the same Spirit". He also makes it very clear that the reason why the Holy Spirit gives these various gifts to various members of the Church is for the common good. These gifts are not meant for individual use, to set one up as superior to our brothers and sisters, to climb the food chain. Rather, these gifts are given by the Holy Spirit for the building of the Church and the advancement of God's kingdom.

Now, as an illustration to drive this point home, Paul uses the image of the body. Just as the body has many members, but is one body, so it is with Christ. When we were baptized and received the Holy Spirit, we all became by God's Holy Spirit one body, composed of many members. This doesn't mean that we lose our identity and the individual becomes lost in the sea of the whole. This does not mean that we succumb to group-think and have to give up our individual beliefs, opinions, political or theological views in order to belong to the body. If this was so, Paul could have used the image of "Cool Aid". When you mix "Cool Aid" with water and sugar, each component becomes lost in the mix, to the point that you cannot distinguish one ingredient from the others. Instead, Paul used the image of the body. In a human body, each organ has characteristics that are unique to it. The ear looks different than the eye, performs a different function, uses different nerves and processes to perform its functions. The kidney looks and works differently than the pancreas or the heart. Each member is different and it performs a different function. Yet, each member has one purpose and one purpose only, and that is to ensure the proper functioning of the body. Each member has a use, a purpose and a mission. There are no useless organs. We all have our place and our mission.

Now, after making it plain that we all have a part to play and that in spite of our diversity we are called to unity as the body of Christ, Paul now is going to tackle the issue of hierarchy. For the Corinthians speaking in tongues was highly prized, whereas other gifts or ministries were seen as less important, or maybe even not important at all. Paul believes this is utterly ridiculous.

Even though some of the organs in the body are quite flashy and get a lot of attention (think for example of the heart, the brain, or the kidney), the body depends on the gifts that all organs bring to the body. Think for example of the foot. It is funny looking, it is an attractive place for bacteria and funny smells, it is prone to all sorts of aches and pains, and it has disgusting nails growing from its toes all the time. Plain and simple, it is an ugly body part. And yet, think how different your life would be if you did not have your feet. They carry our weight, help us with mobility, allows us to be independent, etc. How about the tongue? Have you ever seen a more ugly body organ? It is this piece of meat, always moving inside your tongue! And yet, the tongue allows for speech, taste, creation of saliva and other vital functions. There are many other organs we can talk about, but you get my point.

We all have a part to play even if some of us are the nose hair or the toe nails of the body. My friends, we are not just a body, any kind of body, we are Christ's body. Think about that for a second. Christ no longer has a physical body on this earth. With his death, resurrection and ascension Christ left this human earth and we can no longer see him in a human form. His body is now a spiritual body, a transformed body. What this means is that the only way Christ as a physical body form on this earth today is through the body of his Church. We are his body, we incarnate the Messiah of the world, we are his feet and his hands. We are his tongue and his eyes. We are his heart and his brain. We embody his spirit. The church has Christ's own Spirit coursing through our veins. We have divinity flowing freely throughout our bodies and this divinity is no one else's than Christ's own divinity. I often hear people say that they love God but hate the church and to me this makes no sense. If the church is just an institutional building created by man, then this makes some sense, but the church is not the building. The church are the people who gather here, this pulsating, suffering, celebrating, loving, dreaming, aspiring, caring, aging, life-generating organism of which we all are vital members.

Today we celebrate 189 years of existence as a body of faith gathered on these grounds and these buildings. And it is very tempting for us to think of Grace Church as the people seating here today. But this Church is greater than ourselves. The faith of those dozens of people who started this congregation is still here, surrounding us, watching over us. Their faithfulness and commitment built this place. As I look at all of you, I often imagine your parents, grandparents and great grandparents seating next to you, listening to their preachers remind them that God is important, life is important, relationships are important, the less fortunate are important, and they are important. I often picture the horse-drawn carriages parked outside those doors, while a long winded preacher goes on and one on the proper duty of men, in the middle of a hot August day. And I can still smell the hay, the horses, the lavender perfumes and the after shaves. It is tempting for us to think that this place belongs to us, but this place also belongs to them and it is a testament of their faith and their commitment.

Likewise, my friends, this church belongs to those who will come after us. Children yet to be born, dreams yet to be dreamt, fears yet to be conquered, hearts yet to be kindled by love and perhaps broken by disappointment, lives dedicated to Christ and to his church in a time we can not even imagine. I like to think of the church as a Hospital for sinners, and I pray that our

children's children will find this place a suitable hospitable to deal with lives challenges and to find God mighty to save and always ready to love. But, my friends, whether our children's children have a Grace Church to call their own depends greatly on what we do today. We all have a role to play for the unity and the survival of the body. We cannot let the ministries of Grace up to just a handful of people. We all have a purpose and a role and we are all important. I pray today is the day you engage and your claim your role. We cannot be the body without you. Amen!