

# The Greater Gifts

## 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

For just as the body is one and has many members,  
and all the members of the body,  
though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.  
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.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member  
but of many.

If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand,  
I do not belong to the body,”  
that would not make it any less a part of the body.

And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye,  
I do not belong to the body,”  
that would not make it any less a part of the body.

If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be?  
If the whole body were hearing,  
where would the sense of smell be?

But as it is, God arranged the members in the body,  
each one of them, as God chose.

If all were a single member, where would the body be?  
As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,”  
nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”

On the contrary, the members of the body  
that seem to be weaker are indispensable,  
and those members of the body  
that we think less honorable  
we clothe with greater honor,  
and our less respectable members  
are treated with greater respect;  
whereas our more respectable members  
do not need this.

But God has so arranged the body,  
giving the greater honor to the inferior member,  
that there may be no dissension within the body,  
but the members may have the same care for one another.

If one member suffers, all suffer together with it;  
if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ  
and individually members of it.

And God has appointed in the church  
first apostles, second prophets, third teachers;  
then deeds of power, then gifts of healing,  
forms of assistance, forms of leadership,  
various kinds of tongues.

Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers?

Do all work miracles?

Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues?

Do all interpret?

But strive for the greater gifts.

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

## **The Greater Gifts**

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

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### **I.**

Whereas last Sunday we talked about belly *laughs* in imagining a Christology which maintains a Jesus with a sense of humor, this Sunday I would like to do some belly-*aching*. WOW, it sure was cold this past week, especially Monday and Tuesday. While not necessarily *crazy* cold, it certainly has been cold enough to justify a certain level of complaining, whining and, yes, bellyaching. Which is *exactly* what I am going to do with all of you this morning.

Monday morning, with the temperatures down in the negative single digits, I went to fetch a load of firewood from the woodshed and foolishly decided to wear a pair of uninsulated work gloves. Boy, was *that* a mistake. It wasn't too long before all of my fingers were burning and tingling. The cold air literally took my breath away, and quickly syphoned off any semblance of a bounce that might normally had been in my step.

### **II.**

As I said, though, it was cold but not *crazy* cold. I know *all* about crazy cold, believe me. For those of you newer to the church you may not be aware that I grew up outside of Buffalo (hence the "GO BILLS!" message out on the sign this weekend) and, as if that wasn't enough, spent two winters training and running sled dogs in Northern Minnesota on the North Shore of Lake Superior outside of Grand Marais. This would have been 35 years ago, in 1990 and 1991, when I was in my early 20's, right in-between the semester I spent at United Theological Seminary of the Twin cities, and the 2 1/2 years I spent at Princeton Theological Seminary.

The gentleman who provided me this experience, i.e., the "real" dog musher, was a guy named Arleigh Jorgenson. He had received his M. Div. in early 1970s from Luther-Northwestern Seminary in St. Paul. The "coincidence" of he and I meeting at such a point in my life was in no way lost on me, I can assure you.

### III.

While our days consisted of feeding and watering his 150 sled dogs (Alaskan Huskies) and a great deal of loading/unloading, harnessing/unharnessing and many hours spent on trails all up and down the North Shore and the Boundary Water Canoe Area (BWCA), our evenings were spent singing and playing guitar (which is where/how I learned to play) and talking theology. These conversations, as you would correctly imagine, played a significant role in forming my own theological sensibilities. What you might not immediately recognize, however, is how formative that time in my life was in preparing me for parish ministry. There is a difference between learning *what* to do and knowing *how* to do it.

The other thing which I did during those two years, the real effort if you will, was simply endeavoring to just stay *warm*. Here is a truth for you: while some may like the cold, NO ONE likes *being* cold; noBODY.

### IV.

I remember one cold snap in particular, the second winter I was there. It was *brutal*. Temperatures plunged to -30 degrees (actual temperature, not windchill) and stayed there for over a week. The upside was the load of firewood we got delivered that week shattered like glass when struck with an ax. The downside was how the cold crept into every crack and crevice in Arleigh's not-very-tight log cabin, like it was a living entity seeking to work its way into your bones. Though his standard oil barrel wood stove was literally glowing red on the outside, it seem to hardly matter. Walls were cold to the touch and we would store the leftover pot of spaghetti and sauce by simply placing it on the kitchen floor where it would freeze solid. One night it got so cold and windy, we donned all our winter gear, took a roll of thick plastic and used staple guns to wrap the entire cabin. Now *that* was crazy cold.

### V.

This week's spell of cold weather beckoned me back to memories of that time in my life. Both in regard to the terrific fun I had while living it, but also in the transformative changes which took place in me, and which I have carried forward into my life for the past 35 years. While I cannot say enough good things about Arleigh, as well as my woods-hippie, horse-logging friend Mark Adams whom I met during that period (some of you may remember him

from last spring when he visited and attended worship one Sunday) the other significant influence exerted upon me was the experience I had, and the lessons I learned, working with the dogs. Please understand, this was no occasional hobby or casual endeavor. I worked with the dogs every day, all day, for two full Minnesota winters, tallying 1,000 miles on the back of a sled each of the two years I was there.

## **VI.**

Think about that. It would be like hooking up a 10 dog team to a sled out in the park and riding it all the way to Lansing MI, then turning around and coming back. Then, the next year, going to the Fundy Bay in New Brunswick, Canada and back again to Canton. Over those many miles I saw some spectacular wilderness consisting of beautiful, pristine lakes; deep, primordial forests; and breathtaking vistas. I saw moose, wolves, and all manner of wildlife. I took the measure of my own self as a young man physically, mentally, emotionally and, above all, spiritually.

Now, if are sitting there trying to imagine what it might be like to ride on the back of a dog sled, the first thing to realize is that all those miles are experienced, primarily, in resounding *silence*. Yes, the dogs bark and yip like banshees when you are hooking them up. However, once you start off all you hear is the sound of dogs panting and gentle schuss of runners on snow.

## **VII.**

Most of the runs we took would be several hours in length, if not longer. This gave ample opportunity for contemplation, introspection, and to become adept and being comfortable in the silence of one's own mind in parallel with the silence of the wilderness within which you were immersed. One of the most insightful things that Arleigh ever said to me was this: "The wilderness will speak to you, but it will not shout."

Which is not to say that there wasn't anything to do on the back of the dogsled. First priority is to simply stay *on* the sled. A certain amount of athleticism, balance, strength, and skill is involved in navigating the frequent sharp turns, steep descents, and narrow trails. There is no "reset" button on a dogsled, nor is there any tether holding you to it. If you fall off, the dogs are *gone* and you have a *very* long walk back to the truck. Making it even more challenging, however, is that the dogs will *try* to knock you off the back of the sled. They think that is just a ton of fun.

## VIII.

Which brings us to the dogs. A working sled dog is a blend of draft animal and family pet, with a little wild beast thrown in for good measure. The first thing you discover about sled dogs is that while they may exhibit the same kind of traits as the family dog in being fun, playful, loyal, and affectionate, they do not orient to *you*. Instead, they orient to *each other* as a team, as a pack. While the musher has a role to play, in feeding, watering and allowing them to run (which is their favorite thing in the world to do) you are, otherwise, pretty much superfluous to their existence. Which is to say, they tolerate you.

The challenge of dog mushing is in getting to know the personality and traits of each individual dog and, then, how each of those individuals work together as a team. Given this, I generally worked with the same group of 14 or 15 dogs for those two winters to yield a team of 10 dogs on any given day. With the others sitting out due to injury, personality conflict and, especially, who happened to be in heat (which could be either a disruption or a motivating influence).

## IX.

Though 35 years have past I can immediately rattle off the roster of my team: Otter, Wyoming, Sitka, Tory, Trapper, Michelle, Dakota, Montana, Farmer and, last but not least, Smokey. Otter was the Lead Dog, and by far the best dog in the lot. Arleigh put him in my team, I am sure, so that *he* could teach *me*. He was wizen, woolly, wild, and smart as a whip. Otter was partnered was Wyoming, as he pretty much did whatever Otter wanted, which is why they were paired.

Behind them were Point Dogs Sitka and Tory, two sisters who were just plain unsociable, to the rest of the team and to each other, but they were relentless pace setters. Next came the Team Dogs Trapper and Michelle, then Dakota and Wyoming. Trapper was the smallest dog in the team but was fascinatingly quirky and had the biggest heart of any dog I've ever known. Michelle was the most athletic, but also aloof and a real mischief maker; not to mention the arch foe of Sitka and Tory. Dakota and Wyoming were happy-go-lucky and were thrilled just to be with the cool kids.

## **X.**

Which left Farmer and Smokey as my Wheel Dogs. Wheel dogs have only two responsibilities: to keep up with the team so as to not get dragged along and, to pull like heck on the up-hills. Farmer was a really gentle dog with great physical attributes but not a lot going on upstairs. Then there was Smokey. An enormous dog who was also enormously stubborn, and lazy as the day was long. When the going got tough, though, Smokey was THE dog to carry the day, and the sled on up that hill.

The obvious next move at this point in the sermon is to draw the analogy between working with a team of sled dogs and today's scripture reading from 1 Corinthians 12 where the Apostle Paul says, essentially, as the sled dog team is one and has many dogs, and all the dogs of the team, though many, are one team, so it is with the body of Christ; which is to say, the Church. However, you are all smart enough cookies to draw that analogy for yourselves (And, no, I'm not the musher or the lead dog, I'm more akin to Smokey in this scenario.)

## **XI.**

Instead, what I would like to do is to draw some general observations from my dog mushing days and how they relate to the church. Then, I will end the sermon by telling you the very last lesson the dogs had to teach me. Which was also the most important.

In many ways, a church is an unnaturally occurring occurrence. Rather than follow Darwin's Law of natural selection (or survival of the fittest) at its core the church is a cooperative, rather than a competitive endeavor. Regardless of racial or ethnic composition and social or economic strata, every healthy church must be, almost by definition, a marvel of diversity. We accept all comers, find a place for them, and get them in the game as soon as possible. Quintessentially, a church should be an Island of Misfit Toys; and proudly so.

Pulling a sled is a lot of hard work, but it is also the kind of fun a sled dog wants to do, and enjoys doing. The same should be said of the church. There is no shortage of hard work (physically, emotionally and spiritually) but this is the kind of work that both energizes and delights.

## **XII.**

The biggest sled dog team I ever drove numbered 21 dogs. A *wild* experience I never wished to repeat. It is rare to have one team number that many, but you did so when starting a distance race so as dogs were dropped you had a sufficient number to finish the race. Which is exactly what happened one year when Arleigh started the John Beargrease Sled Dog Marathon. A 500 mile race that begins in Duluth and goes up the North Shore of Lake Superior to Grand Portage, then back again.

Soon after the start, Arleigh crashed the sled, fell and broke his collar bone, and I had to walk in to retrieve the team. It took me over 2 hours to untangle the team, with most of the dogs being quite ill-tempered. Then, I had to drive them to the next check point where the truck was parked. The line of dogs was so long the front of the team would go around a curve in the trail so you'd lose sight of half the team at any given time. That experience disabused me of any desire to go into large church ministry as, essentially, one is just managing madness.

## **XIII.**

Normally, Arleigh and I would each have a 10 dog team; or, 20 dogs to work with on any given day. However, in order to arrive at those 20 there had to be 100 others in the dog lot (or kennel). Some would be too young, some had reached a certain age such that it was unfair to ask them to do any more, some needed a break due to injury or fatigue, while others were in heat, pregnant, or caring for pups.

Similarly, in a church each individual is at a different point or period in their lives which correlates both to what they can do, and what they should be asked to do. While all are part of the ecclesiastical dog lot, each person will necessarily have a different orbit around the church. My time in Minnesota taught me one must work with the team one has, and that there are a great many variables which are at work at any given time, but that these variables also change *over* time. The important thing, is to allow each person to contribute in their own way in order to achieve a critical mass.



#### **XIV.**

Now, one final story. The very last day I ever drove a sled dog team Arleigh and I were on Young's Island located on Poplar Lake about midway up the Gunflint trail and just a couple of miles south of the Canadian border. A popular adventure travel destination at the time, Barb and Ted Young (who were real characters) offered XC skiing from yurt to yurt through the BWCA, with gourmet food and a warm bed ready and waiting at day's end. We were driving our teams back over the frozen lake from the island to the landing on the mainland. It was a gorgeous winter day in Minnesota, with crisp air and clear blue skies, bright sunshine, and freshly fallen snow blanketing the lake and the trees. Though it was tremendously cold, there was no thought of belly-aching as I knew this would be my very last ride. Certainly of the season but, as it turned out, of my life as well.

#### **XV.**

As we made our way across the lake I did this little "giddy-up" sound I had made a hundred times before. *This* time, however, the entire team, each and every dog (including Smokey) suddenly all hit the line at once, my head snapped back, and we went *flying* across the snow in some previously unfathomable top gear. It was almost as if the dogs *knew* that this was my last ride and, as a way of saying good-bye, were both giving me a thrill I did not know was even possible while, at the same time, saying, "look at what we had in us for the past 2,000 miles which you are only now discovering." In hindsight, I realize the dogs were showing me a still more excellent way and that, sometimes, the greater gifts for which we strive are the ones we do not even realize are there.

#### **XVI.**

With the same certainly I had standing on the runners of that sled out in the middle of Poplar Lake that day 30 some years ago, I know standing here today in this pulpit after 26 years that all of you will be my last ecclesiastical dog lot, and these next few years my final ride. That said, I know that if we as a church continue to endeavor to focus on God's greater gifts, having no dissension in the body, but having the same care for one another that we have always shown, with all of us suffering if one member suffers and all of us rejoicing together when one member is honored, I am absolutely certain that God will allow us to go *flying* through this life to attain some previously

unfathomable top gear as we discover just how much is possible for us if we, though many who are distinct, diverse, and certainly “different,” will remain One in Christ. Woof woof. Amen.