

## LITURGICAL CONTEXT

The text for Life Sunday is from the epistle reading for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany of our Lord. The pericope selection is nearly identical for *Lutheran Worship* (1 Corinthians 12:12-21, [22-23], 26-27) and *Lutheran Service Book* (1 Corinthians 12:12-31). We are following the selection from *Lutheran Worship* with the addition of verses 22 and 23. The liturgical theme of Epiphany is the manifestation of Jesus as the Son of God. In the appointed Gospel lesson Jesus shows or reveals himself to be the Son of God by fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies from Isaiah, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:21 ESV) This theme is not as obvious in the appointed Epistle reading, but is still present as Jesus reveals the nature of his body, the church.

Suggested hymns that compliment the text and the theme: LSB 845 “Where Charity and Love Prevail,” LSB 847 “Christ, Our Human Likeness Sharing,” and LSB 420/LW 94 “Christ, the Life of All the Living.”

## TEXT NOTES

vv.12-13 – σῶμα, ατος, τό (*sōma* [body]) and μέλος, εος, τό (*mélos* [member, part, song]) are a word pair that frequently appear together. In Greek thought *sōma* (body) has physical, philosophical, and religious usages. It is also used metaphorically, for instance, the body is the state while the ruler is the head. The Greeks considered the head (κεφαλή / *kephalē*) to be the most important part of the body. In Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:15-16; 5:23; Colossians 1:18; 2:10, 19 Christ is the head of the church. Here in 1 Corinthians the church is the body of Christ, made up of many parts (μέλος / *mélos*) that were baptized “with one Spirit” (ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι).

There is a tendency in Greek thought to denigrate the body or to see it as a lesser thing. For instance, in Platonic thought the body is lower than the spirit/soul. This stands in contrast to Biblical teaching which regards the body as the Lord’s good gift. In the context of 1 Corinthians 12, the parts are joined with the body through baptism “with one Spirit” and this makes up the body of Christ, which is Christ’s church. Note that the Spirit is not contrasted as being higher or better than the body (as in Greek thought) but that the Spirit joins the members/parts into the body.

v.21 – χρεία, (*chrēia*) need, want, use.

v.22 – ἀσθενής, ἑς, (*asthenēs*) without strength, weak, feeble, weakly. Note that “God has chosen the weak” (1 Corinthians 1:26).

v.23 – τιμή, ἡ, (*timē*) honor, value, worth. εὐσχημοσύνη modesty, propriety.

v.26 – πάσχω (*páschō*) suffer. This word only occurs seven times in Paul’s writings (1 Corinthians 1:26; 2 Corinthians 1:6; Galatians 3:4; Philippians 1:29; 1 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:5; 1 Timothy 1:12). Throughout the New Testament, the word is most often used for the sufferings of Christ and for the sufferings that Christians endure for the sake of Christ. In Paul’s writings suffering usually refers to that of the Christian.

συμ-πάσχω, (*sympáschō*) to suffer together, be affected by the same thing. Only occurs here and in Romans 8:17.

## **THEME**

The primary focus is on 1 Corinthians 12:26, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” (ESV) Just as our entire body experiences discomfort from the tiniest of wounds – even a paper cut or a hang nail – affects our entire body, at least for a short time, when one Christian suffers the entire body of Christ suffers. This is especially true in matters pertaining to life issues. There are two kinds of people in this world, those who are members of the body of Christ and our neighbors who could become members of Christ’s body through the preaching of the Gospel but are not now. The body of Christ suffers for those who have been made members of Christ’s body through baptism who suffer and die through euthanasia, unethical medical experimentation, etc. The body of Christ also suffers when those who could’ve become members of Christ’s body but were not given the opportunity to hear the Gospel or to be baptized because of abortion and euthanasia. Christians genuinely care about people because their neighbor is a person for whom Christ has died and desires to save.

### Law

- We consider ourselves to be more important members of Christ’s body than our fellow members in Christ. This attitude leads us to think that their suffering or plight is not as bad as our own, or that their suffering is not ours. We consider some people not truly worthy, or we have “no use for them” so we do not care if their life is taken away from them.
- We have “no use” for some in our world; therefore, what happens to them does not matter. The weak cannot help us so we forget that the Lord chooses the weak to be his people.

### Gospel

- Christ took all our sufferings upon himself, thereby suffering with us and for us.
- Our Lord chose the weak, the foolish, and the helpless of this world to be his people and joined them through baptism “with one Spirit into one body,” his church.

## I.N.I.

When is the last time you hurt all over? A person who suffers from the flu oftentimes hurts and aches over his entire body. Even though his feet are healthy, a person suffering from the flu may have difficulty walking across the room. Yet the suffering of one part of his body affects the rest. If you have ever smashed your thumb with a hammer, you know how the pain from the thumb can radiate throughout your entire body. Even the most minor of injuries such as a paper cut on the tip of the finger can for a moment cause you a body-wide discomfort. Then there are the more serious injuries, diseases, and disabilities that profoundly affect the soundness and function of our bodies. An untreated infection in a finger can lead to a body-wide illness or even death if that seemingly small infection gets into the blood. An untreated cancer at the tip of a toe can ravage the entire body. Seemingly small and minor parts of our body can cause the entire body to suffer. When one part of the body suffers, the entire body suffers. Your body is “sympathetic,” that is, all the parts of the body suffer together.

What we experience daily in our bodies, St. Paul uses to describe our life together in Christ. The Lord’s church is described as the body of Christ. Those who have been baptized “with one Spirit” are the many members made into one body. The word that St. Paul uses to describe this gathering of many members into one body might best be described as a blending in the sense that one blends different paints into one color, or blends different vintages of wine to produce one splendid drink. The Lord gathers various people of different shapes, sizes, colors, talents, abilities, needs, and weaknesses and blends them together to form his church. St. Peter describes the same reality when he speaks of the Lord’s church being built out of living stones. The Lord places those who are weak near the strong so they can be protected just as he placed our delicate and vital organs underneath muscles and bone to protect them.

We oftentimes are tempted to think of ourselves as better or superior to our neighbor. If you think about it, we rarely consider ourselves better than a person who has many more gifts than we do; rather, we think ourselves better only of those who are slightly more gifted or skilled than us or those who have fewer gifts than us. We make comparisons to one another just as St. Paul described in Corinth. We often wonder why the Lord has placed us where he has or given us the lot in life that we have, or why someone else has it better than we do.

Even worse than desiring the position or honor of our neighbor is deciding that we have no need for our neighbor. When we have no need for our neighbor we are essentially saying that he does not belong in the body of Christ. Such attitudes caused division in the Corinthian church and they still cause division, strife, and brokenness today. There are churches and congregations that only desire members who can make productive contributions. These congregations have little to no use for the hurting, broken, and the needy. How tragic when a formerly productive member becomes needy; people in such situations oftentimes feel as if the congregation that once welcomed them no longer has use of them, no longer desires them to be around. How easy we forget that the church is made up of many parts but is one body.

When we decide that we have no need or use for our neighbor in matters relating to life issues, we become murderers, if not in deed then in thought and perhaps in word. When we decide that we have no use for a person in life issues, we decide that the “useless” person has no use of life. In fact, it would be better for us if that person would die. People in our world, in our country, and perhaps even within our own churches, congregations, and families make such decisions every day. After all, it is so much better for society if we did not have to support unwanted babies with our tax dollars. Society will be better off if irresponsible people didn’t

have unwanted babies; we'd have less crime. It is so much better for the unwanted child to never know he was unwanted and unloved. It is so much better for the poor girl, the frightened boyfriend, the embarrassed parents, or the indifferent husband if this unwanted child did not enter the world. The sinful world invents countless rationalizations why it is better to stop this useless, unwanted life. Yet no matter how many rationalizations, excuses, and justifications come forth, nothing changes the fact that one person decided that another person is useless, that there is no reason for this baby to have life. Those in the church who go along with this lie of the world are essentially denying this unborn person an opportunity to be a part of Christ's body, the church, here on earth. This denies God the opportunity to compose, to blend the body of Christ on earth as he sees fit. What a frightful thing it is to frustrate and take away the plans the Lord has for another individual, a person he desires to redeem.

This same sinful attitude permeates other life issues as well. Apart from any other ethic or moral concern we might have regarding I.V.F. (in vitro fertilization), in the end we make a decision that we have use of one embryo but have no use for many others. We do the same in matters related to euthanasia, arguing that a person has no use for life because of pain, suffering, or disability. When a society can decide that it has no use for the weak and the helpless, it has ceased to serve the purpose of civilization and the purpose of government. Against such evil, the Lord will bring judgment. When the Lord's patience is exhausted he will decide that he has no use for such societies, civilizations, and governments. When churches and congregations fail to bear witness to the truth, when they participate in calling evil good, the Lord will bring his judgment upon them as well. This is the frightful word of the Law that we are afraid to speak and despise hearing.

Our Lord Jesus has called us into his body through the word, water, and blood to be his people. He has arranged us and blended us into his body to be served by him the forgiveness of sins which gives us life and salvation. Jesus gives us life within his body. Jesus gives us usefulness both in his body, the church, and in the world. He makes us useful because he became the useless; he became the one no one had need of. He became the one whose life was not worth living, who had no use for life. His life was not worth living because he became sin in our place. He took our sin, our disregard for our neighbor, our hatred, and even our desire to murder upon himself. The High Priest had it right when he prophesied that "it is better for one to die than for the nation to perish." The determination was made that it was better for Jesus to die than for the world to perish. He suffered for our sins; he suffered death and hell in our place. He became useless so that we might live and be useful. In his death he conquered sin and death; in his resurrection he obtained life and salvation for his body, the church. Now our Lord desires and wills to blend many members into his body. The Lord hates the death of sinner, both in body and soul, for He desires that all be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. He wants to incorporate all people into his body, even those this world considers useless – the helpless and the weak. This is good news for us. As St. Paul writes, "Many of you were considered weak by the world." (1 Corinthians 1:27) The Lord desired to make even the likes of you and me a part of his body through the gift of baptism. What an amazingly gracious Lord we have.

Perhaps because of your sin you wonder if the Lord can be gracious to you, too. Each one of us has sinned in ways that we regret and in ways that still haunt us. We often feel guilty for our past actions even though we know Jesus has forgiven us. Guilt can even make us doubt that Jesus can or will forgive us. Such guilt and doubts often haunts people when there is sin related to life issues. A woman who undergoes an abortion often feels guilty and may wonder if she can be forgiven. A man who forced or encouraged a woman to have an abortion may wonder if he

can be forgiven. Perhaps you suffer from the guilt of your sin and wonder if you can be forgiven. Yet St. Paul provides us with a further comfort in his letter to the Corinthians. In Chapter 6, Paul gives a laundry list of sins committed by those who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Then he tells the Corinthians, “And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Corinthians 6:11) No matter how we have sinned or how great our sin, Jesus will forgive you. There is no sin too large for Jesus to forgive. There is no sin that mars you so badly that Jesus cannot make you a part of his body. The great comfort is we have been washed and made holy in Christ Jesus. No matter what you once were, you are a new person in Christ because he has joined you into his body, the church.

Now our Lord has called us to suffer with the members of his body. As our neighbor in Christ suffers, we suffer with him. As we suffer in our lives, our neighbor in Christ suffers with us. As Christ’s church suffers throughout the world, our local congregation suffers too. We pray for the deliverance of our brothers and sisters in Christ from their sufferings. We as Christ body also suffer with our brothers and sisters who are afflicted with guilt over their past sins and our love for Christ compels us to share his forgiveness with them. Yet our concern does not stop with the church only, but we suffer with our neighbors who are not yet but who might become blended into the body of Christ through the preaching of his Word and the administration of his forgiving gifts. We suffer when a person that the Lord desires to save has been deemed useless by the world. We suffer when a person that the Lord loves has their life taken away from them. We pray as the Lord’s church, “How long O Lord? How long?” as we wait for his deliverance. This suffering together is the cross he has given us as Christians to bear. The sufferings we endure in this world are endured as the body of Christ.

We are joined together in Christ not only through his sufferings but also in his honor and glory. Because of this all that hurts and harms us in this life will pass away. We will be set free from everything that brings suffering to Christ’s body here on earth. This is our hope and our comfort. Until that day comes, we remain united to Christ and to each other in baptism. We are strengthened in faith by hearing his Promises and by receiving his body and blood. And we endure and suffer with each other as Christ’s body. Go in peace for Christ has chosen you who were weak and useless in the eyes of the world to be part of his body, the church. (1 Corinthians 1:27)

Amen.