

## “STRENGTH IN NUMBERS”

1 Corinthians 12: 4-27

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It's been quite a season for the Golden State Warriors. Regardless of how the finals end, they have provided their fans—including, I know, many of you—with a remarkable demonstration of how to play the game of basketball. They, of course, began the regular season by reeling off 24 straight wins and then went on to cap it off by winning a record 73 games in an 82 game schedule! As someone who has followed the Warriors most of my adult life, I could never have imagined the heights that they have now reached. They are operating in a different stratosphere!

Although they have their own contingent of superstars in the shooting precision of the “Splash Brothers” and the dynamic energy of Draymond Green, the thing that has made the Warriors a record setting team this year has been their ability to play like a team. Now, teamwork has long been a buzz word in today's sports culture. Now, everyone knows that “there is no I in team” and that it is important to play the game from a selfless perspective. While everyone knows this in theory, however, not many are able to translate the theory into actual practice. The game of basketball can so easily regress into what Charles Barkley calls, “hero ball,” where everyone chooses to play primarily for themselves.

While the Warriors, of course, are not immune to this tendency, they have, through the coaching of Steve Kerr, been able to stay disciplined enough to largely resist it. Certainly, when they are playing at their best, they place their trust in the strength that they have discovered in the numbers of those players who have chosen to share their gifts for the greater good of their team and its goals. **There is indeed, “strength in numbers.”**

When one player might be having an “off night,” other players recognize their responsibility to take up the slack and step forward to make their contribution. While Leandro Barbosa doesn't always earn a lot of playing minutes, he has, of course, been invaluable in certain key moments of key games in the play-offs. On a couple of occasions, he has almost single handedly turn the game around in favor of the Warriors. **There is strength in numbers!**

This motto, of course, applies not only to the team itself, but also to the fans who support the team. When Oracle Arena is filled with passionate and vocal fans cheering for their team, they add yet another tangible ingredient to the recipe of success. At times, when the game is on the line, the fans provide the energy and encouragement that the players need in order to take their game to the next level. And, at times, that is the difference between winning and losing.

**There is strength in numbers**—in the great numbers of fans who support this team.

There is, of course, in this motto that we see on T-Shirts and banners, a reminder of a principle that clearly transcends the game of basketball. There is in this mantra, a clear reminder of a principle that applies directly to our life together as a community of faith.

**There is, you see, strength in numbers for those who choose to be a part of the church, the body of Christ.**

This is, I think, especially significant to point out in a time in which there is great suspicion and, in some cases, derision for the institution that we know as the Church. There is a growing tendency for people today to dismiss the community of faith as irrelevant and no longer necessary for one's healthy spiritual development. This sentiment has been crystalized in that familiar bit of 21<sup>st</sup> century insight that suggests one can be "spiritual, but not religious."

The thinking here is that one can be quite spiritual and connected to God without having the encumbrance of church structures or other people to contend with. Just "me and God" and that's all that really matters. No long committee meetings, no petty quarrels over flowers or hymn books, no having to be accountable to someone else for what you think or say. No muss, no fuss. Besides, it certainly frees up Sunday mornings!

While that may initially sound like a good thing, in reality, it undercuts the primary premise upon which the Church has been built—namely that there is strength in numbers. That's really the message that the Apostle Paul is delivering to the Church at Corinth: There is strength in numbers! There is strength in the diversity of gifts and the ability of different members to contribute in different ways. There is strength in the fact together, they can accomplish the very thing that, by themselves, they cannot even begin to hope to accomplish.

Paul goes to great length to demonstrate to the Corinthians that, in fact, the Church is at its best when everyone understands that, first of all, all gifts are needed—even those that some seem to overlook and ignore. Using the metaphor of the human body, Paul points out that while some parts of the body are more visible and celebrated for the gifts that they provide, they are no more valuable than others parts of the body that may be deemed less respectable. The head does not say to the feet, "I have no need of you." Nor does the eye say to the hand, "I have no need of you." All are needed, says Paul. All are indispensable to the overall effectiveness of the body and therefore, all are to be treated with respect, honor and appreciation.

Just like a basketball team playing at the top of its game, the Church is at its best when every member is making their own unique contribution—whether or not it makes the headlines. There is strength in numbers and that strength becomes tangible when we make room for everyone to share their gifts—regardless of whether they are a superstar or a third team sub.

There is strength in numbers. Think for a minute about what that really means in the life that we share together. Think about what we can do together as we share our various gifts for the common good that we simply could not do by ourselves.

We need look no further than the **Kindness Korps** and the ongoing ministry of care and support that is made possible by many people sharing a variety of gifts each week. Meals

are prepared, transportation is offered, visits are made, notes are written, and acts of amazing kindness are shared on a regular basis. There is strength in numbers!

Or, think about the difference that is made each year through the physical, financial and spiritual support provided by our **Mission Outreach**. Think of all the work projects, the food packing parties, the support of the Food Bank, Trinity Center, and the Souper Center. Think of the impact of all the financial support that is provided through special offerings and communion offerings! There is strength in numbers!

We see that strength tangibly in those who work in our ministries of **children and youth**. From our ministry staff to the Sunday school teachers and the volunteers, from the drivers and the meal preparers and those who make themselves available to do whatever needs to be done in order to make things run smoothly, there is a lot of work to be done. It's a big enterprise—one that requires a well-coordinated body with each part contributing their special gifts at the needed time.

I could easily go on. I could name our network of small group leaders, our cadre of Sod Busters who take care of the church grounds...the Trustees who take care of our facilities...the greeters, ushers and coffee servers who extend radical hospitality to those who worship with us on Sunday mornings.

I think, by this point, that I have made my case. There is strength in numbers and we are blessed by the ministries of so many who are contributing their gifts for the greater good of all. And while not all of those gifts will always be recognized or celebrated, we dare not kid ourselves. Each of those gifts matters because each of those gifts, in some way, touches the life of another, offering a listening ear, a supportive conversation, a helping hand. And when you consider the fact that all of these gifts are being offered within the context of the circle that is our family of faith, you begin to appreciate the difference that our numbers make. It does indeed, take a whole village—a whole community of individuals sharing their gifts—to make a significant difference in this world.

There is an old story about a man who decided that he was finished with organized religion and that he had no need to put up with the frustrations of trying to work things out with others who saw things differently. Upon hearing of this man's decision, his pastor came by for a visit one day. As they sat in the living room in front of the fire place, the pastor listened quietly as the man went through his list of grievances with the church. After the man was finished, the pastor still said nothing for several minutes.

In the silence, he picked up a pair of tongs leaning against the fireplace and took hold of a brilliantly burning ember in the bed of coals. He dragged that ember out of the goals and placed it upon the hearth where it proceeded to lose its brilliant flame and finally, as the minutes passed, turned a coal gray. The flame was extinguished and ember smoldering.

Without saying another word, the pastor then rose to his feet, thanked the man for the conversation and took his leave. The next Sunday, the man was in worship. The pastor's point had not been lost on him. In spite of the frustrations and challenges that come with

the choice to be in community, there is, in the experience of community, a flame and an energy that brings light and life to us in ways that we simply cannot experience on our own.

While some may see themselves as, “spiritual and not religious,” the truth of the matter is that while individual spirituality may be infinitely easier to cultivate, it is no substitute for the more complicated, more demanding spirituality that grows out of the accountability that comes with community. There is, you see, strength in numbers.

I conclude this morning with a somewhat comical reflection by Rev. Lillian Daniel who offers some helpful insight about the “spiritual but not religious” perspective. She writes, as you will note, with a bit of an edge.

On airplanes, I dread conversation with the person who finds out that I am a minister and wants to use the flight time to explain to me that he is “spiritual”, but not religious. Such a person will always share this as if it is some kind of darning insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo.

Next thing you know, he’s telling me that he finds God in sunsets. These people always find God in sunsets. And walks on the beach. Sometimes I think that these people never leave the beach or the mountains with all the communing with God that they do.

Like people who go to church don’t see God in the sunset! Like we are monastic littler hermits who never leave the church building!

Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn’t interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or, heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.

Thank you for sharing, spiritual but not religious sunset person. You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating. Can I switch seats now and sit next to someone who has been shaped by a mighty cloud of witnesses instead? Can I spend my time talking to someone brave enough to encounter God in real human community? Because when this flight gets choppy, that’s who I want by my side, holding my hand, saying a prayer and simply putting up with me, just like we try to do in church?”

**“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” 1 Corinthians 12:27**

There is something to be said for a faith that is experienced and expressed in the context of community. While human community will always bring with it its share of frustrations and challenges, it will also bring with it the opportunity to grow a faith that is strong and resilient, a faith that has been “text driven” in the presence of others, a faith that can impact the world for good and for God precisely because it represents the witness of the many who are linked together as the body of Christ. There is, you see, strength in numbers. Amen.