In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The last two weeks we have heard readings from chapter twelve of Paul’s First Letter to the church at Corinth. In those readings, we heard Saint Paul teach the Church how to think properly about spiritual gifts. God is lavish and generous in giving good things to his creation. Our very existence is a good gift from God—a gift not to be overlooked or spurned. God has said about each and every one of us, that it is his desire that we should be, he has decided that he did not want this universe to exist without us in it. He created you and me so that he could love us for all of our days, and for all of eternity.

But over and above God’s gift of being, God’s giving us our very existence, God has also provided many other gifts. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says that God causes the Sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on both the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45). God gives the gift of being and existence, and then he also gives the means for that existence to go on being, to go on existing. This is God’s providence, his providing for his creation to continue.

But God’s providence, the ways that he sustains his creation, has a very specific goal. God does not shower his gifts upon the whole of his creation, the good and the evil, the just and the unjust, only so that creation will be prevented from slipping into utter and total chaos or anarchy. God does not provide for his creation so that it will simply go on as it has always been without change. God is not interested in maintaining creation’s status quo. God has a very specific purpose for his creation, especially for his human creatures.

In Acts 17 Saint Paul is preaching before a crowd of people in Athens, and he says to them, “God gives to all life, breath, and all things. ... [He] has determined [every person’s] preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwelling, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though he is not far from each one of us” (17:25–27, NKJV). The purpose that God has in creating the whole universe, the purpose that God has in creating each and every one of us and every person that has ever been given the gift of existence, is that we would seek the Lord. As I speak with people at the corner of 88th and Lexington when sitting at the Pastor’s Booth, this is a recurring question, even if people don’t quite know
how to put words to what they are wondering: why am I here? Why do I exist? What is my purpose? Perhaps some of us are wondering this too, or perhaps sometime we might wonder just that: why has God made me?

God has given us the reason for our existence—for you and for me and for every person in the whole world: God has created us to seek the Lord, to seek him and to find him. All of the gifts that God gives to his creation is for this purpose, so that we would seek him, and find him.

But over and above the gift of existence, over and above the gifts of providence, there is another kind of gift that God gives. This is what we have heard about the last two weeks in our readings from First Corinthians chapter twelve. Saint Paul calls these “spiritual gifts.” These are the gifts of prophecy and speaking in tongues, words of wisdom and words of knowledge, gifts of healing and miracles, the gift of discerning spirits. At least these are the ones listed in 1 Corinthians, there is another list with other gifts in Romans 12. These gifts are found only in the Church. These gifts are not “spiritual” gifts in the sense that they are distinguished from “bodily” gifts. These gifts are “spiritual” because of the one from whom they come. They are gifts given by the risen Lord Jesus Christ to his church through his own Spirit. Therefore, they are “spiritual gifts.” You might almost think of that “s” being capitalized in “spiritual gifts.” These gifts are given to the Church so that the Church might be filled with the same life and love and power as Christ himself is. These gifts are given so that the Church might be a gathering of people that are all serving one another and for the general strengthening of the church. As Paul said, “the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all” (12:7 NKJV), for the benefit of all.

Paul goes on from there to show how all of these gifts are to work together, how each benefits all. “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one Body ... and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many” (12:12–14). Paul is speaking about the church, as he very often does throughout his letters, as the Body of Christ. Now this is no mere metaphor for Saint Paul. This is a result of Paul’s first encounter with Jesus. Paul, then called Saul, was on his way to Damascus, planning to go there and find any who followed Christ, and bring them back, bound, to Jerusalem, to be tried and perhaps stoned like Saint Stephen, the church’s first martyr, who was martyred as Saul looked on in approval. But when on his way to Damascus, he sees a blinding light, he is cast to the ground and hears the voice of Jesus say to him: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:4). In persecuting the Christians, in persecuting the Church, it was Jesus himself
whom Saul was persecuting. This is because the Church is the Body of Christ. This is what church membership is all about. To be a member of the Church is to be a member of Christ’s literal and physical body, such that if anyone harms you or persecutes you, it is done to Christ.

These spiritual gifts are given to the Church because of what the Church is. The Church is Christ’s own body, filled with his Spirit. The gifts that the Spirit bestows on the Church are so that the Church might live and function as Christ’s Body on earth.

The great dysfunction of the Church at Corinth was that they were all holding their gifts as being their own possessions, and were using their gifts against one another. They were not using the gifts given them by the Spirit of God in order to live as Christ’s body on earth, but quite to the contrary, they were behaving in a way much closer to what Saul had done before encountering Christ on the Road to Damascus. Little did they know that in their quarrelling and in their bragging, in their dissensions and in their fighting, they were quarrelling and fighting against Jesus Christ himself, the one to whom they belonged as members of a body.

And for all of the mystery surrounding what these “spiritual gifts” are, and all of the confusion and wonder surrounding their use in the Church back then in Corinth and whether or not they should be exercised in the Church today, Saint Paul’s greatest concern in this is found at the end of chapter twelve: “I will show you a still more excellent way” (12:31).

This more excellent way is our reading for this morning. This chapter from 1 Corinthians might be one of the best known of all chapters in the New Testament. The Corinthians are quarrelling and fighting against one another and therefore against the one whose Body they are, and this provides the occasion for Paul to compose what is surely one of the most beautiful and moving things to have ever been written down. It is no surprise that this is a common reading at weddings. Lynnae and I, in fact, had this read at our wedding. But the context here is not first the love between a man and a woman, but the love that governs the whole community and fellowship that is the church:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1–3 RSV)
Saint Paul describes the most astounding of feats: faith to move mountains, speaking in the tongues of angels, giving away everything and suffering martyrdom. Without love, these are nothing at all. Without love these accomplish nothing good at all.

The way of love is the most excellent way, there is no better way than the way of love. You could say that love is the highest of all spiritual gifts, or you could say that love is the total of all the gifts that the Spirit gives, or you could say that love is intended to permeate all of the gifts given by the Spirit, or you could say that each gift is given as a unique way for a member of Christ’s body to love the rest of the Church. All of these are true. Spiritual gifts are gifts of the Spirit, and the Spirit gives nothing but love.

But in Saint Paul’s day, as in ours, we all too often think that we already know what love is. Let me assure you, not everything that parades under the banner of love has proper claim to the name. And so Saint Paul has shown us what love is:

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4–7 RSV)

You might replace the word “love” here with the name of Jesus: “Jesus is patient and kind, Jesus is not jealous or boastful, Jesus is not arrogant or rude. Jesus does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Jesus bears all things, Jesus never loses hope, Jesus’ endurance was never and will never be exhausted.” This is no accident that this is such a fitting description of Jesus. For, as First John says, God is love. God is love. Jesus is God in the flesh, Jesus is God and humanity united in one person. Jesus is love in human form—perfect and complete love. He is embodied love.

And so it is no wonder then that Saint Paul is showing the most excellent way, the way of love. For this is the way of God, the way that God is, and the way that God now is in human shape. This love is to permeate all that the Church is and does, because this love is of God, for God is love, and Christ is God, and the Church is Christ’s own Body. So the Church is to be the Body of Love in this world.

Our reading from Saint Paul ends with what the Church has come to call the three Christian virtues: faith, hope and love. There can be no doubt which of
these is the greatest. Saint Paul says, “so faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13). Faith and hope abide for now, we need them now, but they will not remain forever. There will come a day when faith and hope will be no more. And this is no great sadness, this is something to rejoice in, this is good news. For faith and hope will each give way to something greater than themselves. There will be a day when faith gives way to vision. When we see Jesus face to face, no longer in a mirror darkly or dimly, faith will cease. And so will hope some day give way. For we hope for that which we do not yet have. But some day, hope will find its fruition. There will be nothing left to look forward to, nothing left to yet hope for, when we see the beautiful face of our Lord Jesus. So faith and hope will some day cease, thanks be to God.

But what will never cease—what will never give way to something else, what can never be replaced with something greater than itself—is love. In the sixteenth century there was an English woman named Elizabeth Folkes, she was martyred for Christ’s sake. As she was about to be burned at the stake because of her faith in Christ, her last words were: “Farewell all the world; farewell faith; farewell hope.” And then she took hold of the stake that she was to be bound to, that she was to be burned, and her final words were, “Welcome love.”¹ When we see Jesus face to face, there will be no more need for trusting in that which is unseen, for we shall see, there will be no more need for hope because we will possess, we will have that which we had long hoped for: Jesus himself.

As I said earlier, Paul is talking here about the love that governs the Church. Saint Paul has here been teaching us about the communion of love that the Church simply is. In all that I have said, it has been the fellowship and love within the Church that I have had in mind.

But, I want to close with a little reflection about just what the Lord has promised will happen when the Church exists in this world as the Body of Love.

William Temple, who was Archbishop of Canterbury in the early 20th century, once said, that the church is the only institution in the world that exists exclusively for the sake of its non-members. (Repeat). You will not get that definition of the Church from Saint Paul, and certainly not from our readings in First Corinthians this week and the last few.

It is not that this definition is entirely wrong, it is right in a way. The problem with this definition, is that saying the Church exists exclusively for its non-members, is simply too small, too narrow. The Church exists for God. The Church exists to be a community on earth that loves and worships God with full heart, soul, mind and strength. But our God loves this world. “For God so loved the world” (John 3:16). So precisely because the Church exists for God alone, we share in God’s love for this world.

Many of us are concerned about rising secularism, the sidelining of the church in the broader culture and so on. Church buildings all across the western world and in our city are closing their doors, or are faced with shrinking budgets and generally tightening the belt all around. There are many people who will promise to show how this can be reversed. Before I went to seminary, before I had ever stepped foot into a Lutheran church, Lynnae and I went to a Bible school. There I took a class that was all about church growth strategies. What never came up in that class, and what almost never comes up in the discussions surrounding how to grow our churches or stem the flow of people who stop coming to church, is the command that Jesus Christ gave to his disciples, and the promise that goes along with it. The command is this: Jesus says, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (John 13:34). And the promise that Jesus gives with this, what Jesus promises will happen when we love one another as he loved us, is this: “by this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35, ESV). This is an enormous promise. “All people will know.” And there is an awful amount of knowledge that this entails, listen to what is known by “all people”: “all people will know that you are my disciples.” There is a knowledge of the Church, a knowledge of Jesus, and a knowledge of the Church’s relationship to Jesus. And it all comes from one thing: when the world sees how the Church has love for one another. For when the world sees how we love one another, it is no exaggeration to say that they see the love of God, they see the God who is Love.

And so, as Saint Paul says immediately after our reading, let us “pursue love.” Above all other things, let us put on love. Let us seek to love one another as Christ has loved us. And this morning, let us come to this table, and receive the Body and blood of Christ, let us together be made anew into the Body of Christ, let us come together and be made into the Body of Love, to the glory of God the Father, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Amen.