

## 1.17.2021 Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Romans 12:6-16)

Charles Plumb was a U.S. Navy fighter pilot in Vietnam. After 75 combat missions, and just five days before the end of his tour, his plane was shot down by a surface-to-air missile. Captain Plumb ejected and parachuted into enemy hands. After his capture, he spent the next six years in a communist Vietnamese prison. He survived that tragic ordeal and now lectures on lessons learned from that experience.

One day, when Captain Plumb and his wife were at a restaurant, a man who'd been sitting at another table came up and said, "You're Plumb! You flew jet fighters in Vietnam from the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk. You were shot down!" Plumb asked the man, "How in the world did you know that?" He replied, "I packed your parachute." Captain Plumb gasped in surprise, and gratitude. The man shook his hand and said, "I guess it worked!" Plumb assured him, "It sure did. If your chute hadn't worked, I wouldn't be here today."

Captain Plumb couldn't sleep that night, thinking about the man who'd packed his parachute, picturing in his mind what this sailor might have looked like in a Navy uniform, standing in front of a long wooden table in the bowels of the ship, carefully weaving the shrouds and folding the silks of each parachute, every time holding in his hands the life of someone he didn't know. Plumb couldn't help but wonder how many times he might have seen that man onboard, and not said a word to him because Plumb was a fighter pilot, and the man that would one day be instrumental in saving his life, was just a sailor.

The inequality that Plumb describes, which existed between himself and this sailor, is something that's familiar to all of us. As you know, we live in a society that measures the value of an individual, not by who they are, a person "*fearfully and wonderfully made*" (Psalm 139:14) in the image and likeness of God, but instead, by what they do. The world measures a person's value by their performance, telling us that those who do the most and earn the most are worth the most. On the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk, a sailor who could pack a parachute was of some value, but a Naval Aviator, who could fly an F-4 Phantom at Mach 2, was thought to be of more value than the

average sailor.

On that aircraft carrier, and in our society, some people are thought to be better than others, but that kind of thinking doesn't belong in the Church, because in the eyes of God all His children are equal. All are equally loved. All are equally valued. In the Epistle we read this morning, St. Paul describes the equality, the unity, and the kind, affectionate love that is meant to exist in the Church as he exhorts Christians to *"Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another..."* (Romans 12:10). Paul tells us to *"Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate"* (Romans 12:16). In the Church there is no separation of one class of person from another, because the Church is one Body, we are one Body with many members (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). The Church is one Vine, a single Vine with many branches (John 15:1-5). The Church is one family, the family of God, and therefore it doesn't matter if you're the newborn baby, the teenager, the mom, the dad, or the 95 year-old grandmother, because, as we all know, in a family your value isn't based on what you can do, your value is based on who you are.

God doesn't love you for what you can do, God loves you for who you are, and here in His Church you are not loved for what you can do. You're loved for who you are, a child of God. It's that unconditional love of family that gives every one of us the freedom to truly love one another, and to joyfully serve our Lord in His Church. In the passage we read today, St. Paul tells us that we all have different gifts, that we serve God *"according to the grace that is given to us."* To the person who has the gift of prophecy, he says, *"let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness"* (Romans 12:6-8).

In each of these examples, St. Paul wants us to recognize that God has graciously given every one of us different gifts, gifts that are meant to be unwrapped and used well, because when the minister ministers, when the teacher teaches, when the giver gives, we are fulfilling our specific role as individual members of Christ's Church. We are "not only with our lips, but in our lives" giving ourselves to His service, we're walking before Him in

“holiness and righteousness,” we’re responding to God’s grace by using the different gifts He’s given us to express our love for Him by loving and serving one another.

The examples that St. Paul lists, such as prophecy, ministry, teaching, or giving, can be seen manifested in the lives of saints throughout Church history, and here at St. Andrew’s we could certainly make a list of our own. In our small community we have a long list of people who use the gifts God has given them to serve faithfully in so many different ways. We have been blessed to be a blessing, and on Sunday morning we should remember how blessed we’ve been by the person who cleans the church, who prints the bulletin, who plays the processional hymn, who sets the altar, who prays with and for this community, who stays late for a Vestry meeting, the person who gives to St. Andrew’s what they could spend somewhere else so that we can pray and worship together in this beautiful church, and the person who gives through St. Andrew’s so that we can reach out in love to the world God gave the life of His only Son to save.

God has given us all different gifts to share with one another, and perhaps the most important gift He’s given us is not the glory of piloting an F-4 Phantom at Mach 2, but instead, the humble ability to pack a parachute for someone we love. Jesus said to His disciples, “*In this world you will have many trials and sorrows*” (John 16:33). He described the authentic Christian as one who would take up their own *cross* to follow Him (Matthew 16:24). The true Christian life is often difficult, and even painful, because a Christian lives that life in a fallen world. You could say that we live in enemy territory, because Jesus calls us to be in the world, but not of it (John 17:16), meaning, the Way we strive to follow, the world has abandoned, the Truth we seek, the world disregards, and the Life we cling to, is a Person the world despises and rejects (Isaiah 53:3).

If you try to live your life like Jesus Christ, if you, like Him, are in this world but not of it, sooner or later you will suffer for it, you’ll suffer for Him (Galatians 6:17), or in the context of this sermon, sooner or later you’ll get shot down, and when that day comes you’ll need two things: a parachute and a safe place to land. By the grace of God, we’ve been given both. God gave us brothers and sisters in Christ, He gave us a church family filled with

people who He has blessed with different spiritual gifts, gifts that are meant to be used to pack our parachutes - with Him. God gave us one another to help us in the Way, and God gave us a safe place to land. He gave us His Church, a place where *“there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female...”* A place where we *“are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Galatians 3:28). A family where we are all equal, equally loved and equally valued, not for what we can do, but for who we are, people *fearfully and wonderfully* made in His image, the children of God.