

# St. Mark's Shipwreck

1 Corinthians 12

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on January 16, 2021

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Anna and I have been watching a show called Station Eleven. Anyone else? The show is based on a novel, the premise of which is that a variant of the flu has evolved that is both so contagious and so deadly that the virus initiates a worldwide apocalypse. I know—a little too close to home. The show follows a small set of survivors who all happen to be at, or some other way connected to, a particular performance of King Lear at a theater in Chicago on the night the outbreak begins.

What's compelling about any kind of apocalyptic, end-of-the-world drama is that it tends to quite quickly reveal people's true character. There's no more mundane workaday habits or distractions to hide behind. No more incentive to keep up with cultural niceties. The same is true for Station Eleven. It is fascinating to watch how the people left choose to treat one another. These people who for the most part have nothing in common other than that they happen to all choose to go see King Lear at this theater in Chicago on this Thursday night. This is no spoiler beyond the first couple minutes of the first episode, but this drama is at its most acute between a character named Jeevan, an average and aimless thirtysomething whose girlfriend left the play early because she "felt sick," and Kirsten, a 9-year old child actor in the play whose child minder has gone missing and whose parents aren't answering their phones. These two find themselves stuck together at what appears to be the end of the world and they must decide - do we stay together? Are we now friends who look after one another? Or are we rivals competing for scarce resources? What responsibility do we have for one another at the end of the world?

This got me thinking - What if instead of those who attended a performance of King Lear, it was those who attended St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Austin, Texas on this second Sunday after Epiphany in the year 2022. But for the sake of our anxiety, let's say it's not a virus, but a more palatable crisis - say a snow storm that cuts off everyone's water and power for several days. I'm kidding. No, let's say, St. Mark's is a ship—you know that's why we call this room the "nave," right, because the Latin word *Navis* means ship, which is a reference to the way that rooflines typical of churches look like an upside-down ship? Anyway, let's say St. Mark's is a ship, and we get shipwrecked on an island. Look around - it's just us. What happens next?

This is a tried and true recipe for television success ever since Survivor and MTV's The Real World. Throw a random group of people in a room, lock the door, introduce some kind of crisis, and see what happens. Where would we be, the people of St. Mark's, on the spectrum from Squid Game to the Great British Baking Show?

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul articulates the theological architecture for a reality television show about shipwrecked Christians. Paul reveals the true character of the church, what is deeply true at its deepest levels, even if it doesn't always appear to be the case at the surface. Paul is saying, this is what the church is, and this is what the church is called to be.

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

This is the first thing Paul is saying about the nature of the church. (There are three total.) Different gifts are given to all. God is the one who gives the gifts, and God gives gifts for a specific purpose—for the common good. You can imagine pretty easily how this applies to the immediate aftermath of our shipwreck. It would be a matter of identifying who is good at what, dividing duties accordingly, and learning how to survive together. Who would be in charge of food? Who knows how to build shelter? Who knows what plants are poisonous and which aren't? Who can build a good fire? For the love of all that is holy, can anyone fix a bathroom? Who can play guitar while we see kumbaya under the stars?

Another way to put this first thing Paul is saying about the nature of community in the church is that our diversity is a strength not a weakness. It appears to be a natural human phenomenon that we gravitate towards people that are similar to us. And it also appears to be a common response that when something or someone different is introduced to a group of homogenous human beings, that different thing or person is treated with suspicion or as a threat. Paul is saying the church is upside-down from that world. What makes us different makes us beautiful. God made you just the way you are because God wanted one just like you. And God wanted to see what good could come from someone like you putting your particular you-ness in service of the world around you.

Diversity is not just something beautiful, diversity is a means of our very survival. This is why the shipwreck scenario is helpful, because in that context, it's obvious you need different people with different skills. But the truth is that this is the nature of the church all the time, not just in times of crisis. That's the first thing. Diversity is a strength of the church, not a weakness.

And that all works well enough for that first phase, where "everyone's in this together" and endorphins are surging. But think about the next phase. It's never as pretty. It's when you remember you've got to run for reelection. Or more to the world of our shipwreck metaphor, it's when you realize that John always eats more than his share of the fish. Or that Sarah conveniently never volunteers to take the night watch. When it's not at all clear what gifts Adam has to share for the common good at all. The second phase is when the tv gets good. When back room alliances are formed, where resources are hidden, and when insults start flying.

We have to move beyond this week's reading into next week's reading to hear Paul say these words, but they're helpful at this point. Paul goes on to say *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 [the body of] Christ. . . . [And] 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.'*

The second thing Paul is saying about the nature of community in the church when conflict arises. Paul is saying, Christians are not afforded the luxury of going their separate ways. You are not allowed to cut people out of this community. Even an excommunication is essentially an invitation to come back along agreed upon criteria.

Paul says we cannot go our separate ways because we are ontologically bound to one another. You are one body, and not just any body, you are the body of Christ. Think about the bread. Communion used to be celebrated with one loaf. Pieces from one loaf would be torn off and distributed to each Christian. So that pieces from one loaf would then exist in the bodies of many, and there would then be a literal, embodied connection mirroring their spiritual one—they are part of the same loaf of bread. They are part of the same body of Christ. I don't know if you have had any experience with this, but some people are annoying. Some people are difficult. If you don't know anyone who is annoying or difficult, I have some hard news to share with you—it's probably you.

But even so, you are the body of Christ. And you are constantly becoming the body of Christ. Constantly eating again, being reabsorbed. It's a classic paradox. St. Augustine said these words when he distributed the consecrated bread: *Behold what you are. Become what you receive.*

The third and final thing Paul is saying about the nature of Christian community has to do with those members of the body who do not appear to be pulling their weight. Or those whose differences don't seem to be contributing to the common good in any obvious way. Paul says this: *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.*

This is the key to everything. Not only is the Church a community of many different people with many different gifts. Not only is the Church is a community where, whether we like it or not, we have to learn to get along; where we can't cut anybody out. The Church is a community that inverts the natural hierarchy of social relationships completely. Paul is saying, those who are most despised by society? Those who are the weakest? That's who is at the very heart of this community. That's who we need more than anyone else. That's who we honor above everyone else.

This is the shape of Christianity - the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Jesus himself was despised. Jesus himself was made weak. And yet Jesus is the source of new life at the heart of the universe. Jesus is the key to everything.

Let's return to the shipwreck. Our island life. As we're dividing up chores and tasks. As we're learning to survive. As we continue to weather a pandemic that will never end. As things become difficult and people become annoying and differences and weaknesses become harder to bear, we might eventually find ourselves wondering to ourselves "what's even the point of all this?" The answer is, what we're already doing is the point. This. Being the body of Christ. That's it. That's the heart of the Gospel. Whether we live or die. Whether we're rescued or not. We're already living at the heart of it all.

Amen.