



Sermon delivered by
The Rev. Dr. Augustus E. Succop III
Quail Hollow Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina
June 4, 2017

“Covering the Bases”
(I Corinthians 12: 3-13)

My father was a list maker. He would make a list and check it twice, especially on the weekends. My father made his list not so much for his sake, but for our sake, so we the family would be on his “page.” My father left little, very little to chance. To say he was well organized would be an understatement. I would like to believe my father acquired his list-making tendency from our German heritage. Germans are well known for making lists and keeping records, which my father kept meticulously. Taped on the inside of lampshades around the house would be the dates of when that light bulb had been last changed. I have never felt compelled to continue that tradition. We Presbyterians are no less detail oriented. We Presbyterians also make lists and keep records, and we are even known for doing things “decently and in order,” and sometimes that requires making more than one list and checking it more than twice to make sure we have all we need to be the church, to be the church the risen Lord has called us to be through our baptism.

My experience and my observation is that there is nothing more disappointing, nothing more unattractive, nothing more tragic than a church that is not prepared to be the church. And you and I have heard the horror stories. There are churches out there that do not have their act together. There are congregations who are clueless and unaware as to what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ. There are church leaders who claim to be burned out and, thus, they end up getting in the way and becoming just plain helpless. Worst of all, there are congregations who believe with all their heart that being the church is all up to them. They’re in charge, and unless they do it, nothing gets done.

Well, for churches such as those that may be the way to fly; for them that may well be the prevailing and conventional wisdom, but that is not what St. Paul believed nor was it what the risen Lord had told Paul. What Paul believed about the church and what he passed on to the church is that the church belongs to God. So hands off! There’s nothing to fix about the

church, nothing to invent, nothing to tweak, nothing to burn you out by being the church of Jesus Christ. Being the church is all about what God wants done, and through the church the risen Lord seeks to accomplish what the Father desires, what the Father seeks, and what the Father wants for the life of this world and for people not so unlike you and me.

The Feast of Pentecost, what we have come to call the “birthday” of the church, is when we remember that God has prepared the church quite well for its mission and its witness. Nothing is lacking, nothing is missing, nothing is out of order. The Lord has made His list and has checked His list to make sure nothing has been forgotten or left out or overlooked, and then the Lord has looked to you and me and says to us, *You be the church! You are the visible body of the risen Christ. When people want to know if Christ is risen, your witness and your mission will make it clear that Christ is risen, and that Christ is at work in the world making it all happen through His church, through the likes of you and me.*

And you and I have had the same thought and more than once. Why in heaven’s name did the Lord get us involved if the Lord wanted the church to be the church? I confess, I am at fault just as often as all of you. There have been times when it has occurred to me that if the Lord has equipped the church to be the church, it has been at times our job to dismantle, to complicate, to undo what the Lord has done, and all with the best of intentions; all in the belief that we are doing what? The Lord’s work. You may not be surprised, but years ago I learned of a congregation right here in Charlotte that put strict limits on what the Holy Spirit was permitted to do in and through that congregation. Those leaders didn’t want things to get out of hand, and boy did they succeed. In their effort to clamp down on Holy Spirit, they surpassed their wildest expectations. Those leaders were so successful, that church almost, *almost* had to close its doors. Don’t be surprised to learn that when we say we do not need God’s help, God honors our request. The God of Jesus Christ never, ever forces divine help upon us. If we can do it ourselves, whatever it may be, the Lord says, *Have at it!* And how often has the church learned its lesson the hard way, that nothing gets down, at least not very well, without the help of the Helper, the Comforter, the Promised One, the One Who still reminds us, *I am with you, always, for I am the One Who makes all things possible.*

Notice in the morning lesson the number of times Paul points Who is behind the equipping of the church. Paul goes down his list, and for all the variety of gifts, for all the many activities, for all the goodness, the wisdom, the language, the faith, the healings, the miracles, it is all the *same* Spirit. God has put into motion all of that so the church can be exactly and precisely what God wants it to be, and nothing has to be invented or improved

upon or redesigned or added-on by us or by anyone. Almighty God, through Holy Spirit, has provided the church with everything it needs to be the church, to be the church in faith, hope and love, to be obedient, and to be a joyful expression of what God wants for you and for the life of this conflicted but deeply loved world.

Our role, our calling is to believe that what God has set in motion, what God has put on the table is more than enough for the news to be told that *Christ is risen*, that the impossible has been made possible, and we make known such news in a variety of ways and expressions and ministries. We make known the news of God's initiative in Jesus Christ allowing the Spirit to empower us to be the church, and I hope you heard that. The church makes known God's plan for peace on earth by allowing itself to be empowered, equipped and energized by Holy Spirit, and by now you should know what that means. It means that we can't be in charge. For some of us that means we need to take orders instead of giving orders. For some of us that means we need to be the change we want to see in the life of the world and in the life of our own family. And that leads us back to the same Spirit.

The same Spirit. Paul uses that phrase at least half a dozen times: *the same Spirit*. What does Paul mean by emphasizing that it is the same Spirit at work doing *this* and doing *that*? I believe Paul wants us to go back to the beginning, to the very beginning, to creation, to that point in time when the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. Paul is drawing our attention to when a mighty wind swept over the face of the waters, and God set creation into motion. That Spirit is the same Spirit that has equipped and empowered the church. That Spirit is why the church can be the church without any fear of failure or burn-out or disappointment or discouragement. The Spirit that was present way back in the beginning is the same Spirit bringing us together to be the church on this very corner of south Charlotte, and, thus, to be One in Him so that together we end up living as one in peace and one in harmony and one in the friendship Christ has delivered to us directly and personally from the very throne of God.

In a moment, and all by the same Spirit, we will be reminded that we have been empowered through the most unassuming means: a cup and a piece of bread. Who would have thought that the mission and witness of the church depended upon such ordinary, everyday items such as bread and a cup? But, ordinary they be no longer. Those gifts are *activated*, so says Paul. That's the Greek word, "to be activated." But what is meant is that God is in charge of those gifts and through those gifts, and that means those gifts have a God-given power about them and in them and through them, and in the joining together of those

gifts (and remember we, too, are the gifts), miracles take place, healings occur, enemies become friends, and God's will is accomplished. When you and I take in, when we chew on, when we feast upon those simple gifts we recall Who is in charge in ways both oh-hum and OMG, in ways logical and unexpected, in ways normal and abnormal, in ways we can figure out and in ways we simply have to chalk up to the love of God.

The same Spirit that raised Jesus Christ from the dead has equipped and continues to equip our supposedly normal, everyday lives to do and to think and to say things that will turn a head if not a heart towards Jesus Christ, and to know Him as the Prince of Peace for the life of the world and for their own life. The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead has covered all the bases, and through each one of us, through our faith in that same Spirit, risen and reigning, nothing, nothing will ever be left to chance.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, thank You for the gifts You have poured out upon us to be Your Son's church. Thank You for preparing us so very well to proclaim the glory of Jesus. Inspire us to notice everyday how well You have prepared us to be His church so He may through proclaim through us Your message of peace and good will. Amen.