

God makes us one body in Christ
A Sermon preached by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey
at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA, January 24, 2016
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany (year C), 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

1 Corinthians 12:12-31(NRSV) *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 Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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." On the contrary, 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, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. [And I will show you a still more excellent way.]

Today's New Testament reading is about the body of Christ. We throw that phrase around quite a lot, so its meaning is sometimes lost in its familiarity. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is where we get this language about how God make us the body of Christ, and individually members of it. Last week, we heard Paul speak about various spiritual gifts that God gives to the church. This week, we hear about how all the people who have these gifts fit together. God makes us one body in Christ.

To see ourselves as members of one body is not as strong a metaphor as it once was, because it sounds so familiar. We talk about members and membership in so many ways. We are members of teams, members of clubs, members of public television. But Paul's use of this metaphor is very strong. When Paul writes about "members," he's talking about body parts like hands and feet and eyes and ears. You might get the right feel for this when you think of the word "dis-member." To dismember is to tear apart the pieces of a body—to tear apart arms and legs, hands and feet. Those are the kinds of members Paul means—less like names on a list and more like body parts essential to a whole, living body.

Each of us is different and each brings unique gifts to the Christian Community. Just as hands and feet are different, like eyes and ears, those gifts are important, even though they are different. We have different ages, personalities, talents, skills, perspectives, experiences, and different spiritual gifts as well. Just as a body is whole with all its parts, so we are whole when we function well together----when our relationships are healthy, grounded in Christ and mutually supportive in pursuit of our mission.

Just as our whole body aches from the slightest ingrown toenail, so also the body of our community aches when part of the body hurts. Just as one system in the body works to fight disease in other systems in the body, so we also work to hold each other accountable and strengthen each other as disciples of Jesus Christ. This is true for us as a local parish----this is also true for Christians throughout the world. That accountability is part of how we live into this gift that God gives us by making us one body in Christ.

There's something very interesting about Paul's emphasis in this passage. You might think that Paul's point is directed to people in the church who were shutting out some people, or discounting their value. That is certainly implied. But Paul's main attention seems to be for those who separate themselves from the body or discount their own worth. Paul writes "If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body." Paul is telling those who discount themselves and their own value to the church: 'you *are* part of the body and essential to it. Even if you say "because I don't have the gifts of others, I don't belong," you still belong and you do matter.'

As I said last week, you may not think that you are valuable to the music ministry of this church because you are not a professional musician, but the professionals need you to sing, or else our ministry has failed! In fact, we need each other, and we need each person to embrace God's call to participate in the body of Christ. God makes us all one body in Christ.

So why is this so important to Paul and why is this so important to God? Well, partly the reason is organizational. A healthy organization shares roles and functions and relies on each person to take a role in order to be effective. The business world, especially in industry, has embraced the team model to help harness each person's unique gifts and benefit from their collaboration. The world of sports gives us the example of the joy and energy available from this team model. God certainly wants the church to make a difference in our ministry, and we can't function without each person playing a part and actively participating.

Paul's purpose is partly organizational, and partly relational. Paul is not only aiming for efficiency or effectiveness in his model of many-members-one-body. Paul also cares about each person in the community. If we value each other—even valuing ways in which we might have different gifts or talents or roles—then we deepen our relationships with each other. We learn to mutually support one another, we stay connected to each other and the trials and joys that we can share. If we disregard part of the body—or if we disregard our part in the body, then we lose relationships and the opportunity to share the grace of God together. But if we follow Paul's vision for us, we grow in relationship with each other in Christ.

Paul's purpose is partly organizational, and partly relational. But Paul's purpose is especially spiritual. This is not about independent individuals contracting for mutually beneficial advantages. We are not in this endeavor to maximize our personal benefit, and ready to exit our mutual dedication when it costs us something. We are in relationships in the body of Christ to participate in God's grace. We are in this business to love like Jesus so that we might grow close to Jesus and the reconciliation he brings.

To love like Jesus, we start with humility and self-giving generosity. We start with valuing others—not for what they can do for us, but for the unique value they are in God’s eyes. We see them as beloved by God, and we choose to join with God in loving them—sacrificially, giving without requiring a return. We give because God has given to us, and the well of God’s grace will never run dry.

Being members of one body in Christ involves humility and mutual submission in Christ. We seek to see others and ourselves as God sees us. God does not see us as disposable in the church, but as essential to the integrity of the whole body. And God calls us to see each other the same way too. Following this path means following Jesus, who gave himself for us. Following this path means participating in his grace and seeing him bring new life to the church and the world.

The church is not always at its best, but when we are, we are instruments of God’s grace. Here in this church, I have seen a group of men reach out to show love to a total stranger, all because they heard about the death of the man’s wife. I have seen a woman open up just a little bit to share her struggle caring for her sick husband, and receive an abundance of support. I have seen members of this parish take risks to have the difficult conversation in the midst of conflict to sow repentance, understanding and reconciliation. These actions did not come from self-interest or organizational efficiency. They came from men and women who know something of the love of God in their own lives. They and so many others like them in this church have felt that same generous love of Jesus Christ, and from that great gift were willing to step out to share it with others.

God makes us one body in Christ. Can you live into this great gift? Honor one another—and value what others bring to knowing and following Jesus, even when their gifts may be hard to understand. Also, honor the gifts that God has given you and take your place in this community—both in your roles in ministry, and in the generosity of spirit that binds us together. Participate in what God is doing in this community by caring for others the way Jesus loves us. In so doing, you will participate in the joy of God’s grace and see others drawn in too.