

## Epiphany 3, Year C

January 24, 2016

1 Corinthians 12:12-27 *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 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.*

Twenty-one years ago last Sunday, the city of Kobe, Japan suffered a massive earthquake which claimed the lives of over 6,000 people. One year – to the day! – *before* the Kobe quake there had been an earthquake in Los Angeles. When the quake hit Los Angeles and glass storefronts were shattered, a majority of the stores lost their merchandise to looters. Store owners who had already lost great sums in damage to their buildings from the earthquake suffered further insult and loss when people walked into their stores through the broken windows and carted out televisions, stereos -- whatever their individual hearts desired. American journalists reported, with some astonishment, that there was *none* of that in Kobe, Japan after *their* earthquake. *No* looting whatsoever, and no gouging of prices. The difference may lie in the fact that the Japanese have a strong sense of community. To steal from a store owner would be to hurt the community of which each person is a part. "God has so composed the body," Paul writes in our Epistle, "...that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." It would seem that the people of Japan, only 1% of whom are Christian, know and live the truth which St. Paul preaches in today's lesson better than we Americans, 83% of whom are Christian. Indeed, in a speech during the anniversary observance of the earthquake, the mayor of Kobe, Japan said, "Kobe is ready to make full use of its lessons from the earthquake by offering our

recovery know-how to any disaster-affected place in the world.” The people of Kobe realize that they are not only a united community of Japanese; they are part of a *world* community which encompasses every fellow human being on the face of this earth.

“Just as the body is one and has many members,” Paul writes, “and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ...” (1 Cor. 12:12) You have heard me say many times that I don’t think we take what Paul is saying in this chapter *literally* enough: differing body parts in one human body isn’t just some cute *analogy* for the body of Christ, the Church; it is far more **organic** than that! The image of many different parts in one physical body isn’t just vaguely *similar* to how the Church, the body of Christ, is composed; it *functions* in an **identical** manner. The Church, like a human body, has spiritual lifeblood pulsing through all its parts, each member of the church relying for its very life and wellbeing on the other members, each part sharing in the pain or joy of every other part. It is literally the physiology of the body of Christ mirrored in – and connected to – the physiology of our human bodies. But in our American individualism, we can easily forget our fundamental connectedness.

Richard Rohr, whose favorite Apostle is St. Paul, writes: “For Paul, community is the living organism that communicates the Gospel message. If Christ’s... message doesn’t take form in a concrete group of people then, as far as Paul is concerned, it is an unbelievable message.” I wonder: Has the way we Christians treat other human beings made the Gospel message unbelievable to the world?

As you well know, we are currently in the last days before the first Presidential caucus in Iowa. *The Des Moines Register* ran an article on Jan. 16 titled “Attack! Why [the] next 2 weeks could get nastier than ever.” The article began with these words: “Nothing will matter more than attacks... in the final 15 days before voters drop the hammer in Iowa...”

“With the Democratic and Republican presidential races in Iowa neck and neck, the campaigns are in all-out warfare mode. Rivals are no longer delicately insinuating insults and instead are drilling into their rivals by name.”

Is this how Christ’s message takes concrete form in our nation?

We as Christians *have* to see what this finely honed and calculated political nastiness **does** both to our own *spirits* and to any sense of community. We have to recognize how destructive this viciousness is to the realization and fulfillment of our identity as one body in Christ, as so powerfully described by St. Paul, and prayed for by Jesus the night before he was crucified. Far from the parts of the body caring for one another as St. Paul describes, we act (both in our political campaigns and other parts of our common life) as though the hand is hacking away at the leg with a machete. Just two days ago, the Pope spoke out against “the increasingly aggressive nature of much political discourse and the use of

social media as a forum for personal abuse.” Far from working to *strengthen* our unity as “**one** nation under God,” we foment *un*godly polarization, anger, viciousness and fear. Black vs. White, Christian vs. Muslim, Christian vs. other Christian, Republican vs. Democrat (as well as divisions **within** the political parties). If we truly *trusted* in God in our **lives**, rather than simply rallying to keep the *words* “In God We Trust” stamped on our currency, we would embrace the unity in community which God intends, as Paul so passionately describes in his letter. Can we not see how unbelievable we make the Gospel when political candidates tout their Christian credentials while at the same time hacking away at other parts of the body of Christ? What would St. Paul say? What would Jesus say?

Often forgotten in this dense 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul’s letter is what he says about the *weaker* members of the body. “[T]he members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,” he writes... “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.”

This is exactly what we see Jesus doing in our Gospel this morning. **Last** week we noted that Jesus’ **FIRST** actions mentioned in the Gospel of John set the stage and theme for the rest of the Gospel. In *today’s* Gospel lesson, we hear of Jesus’ **first** actions recorded in **Luke’s** Gospel, and again, what is mentioned *first* sets the tone for the rest of the Gospel. “Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit,” goes to his hometown synagogue and reads from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the **poor**. He has sent me to proclaim release to the **captives** and recovery of sight to the **blind**, to let the **oppressed** go free...”

“Jesus, filled with the **power** of the Spirit,” declares that God has sent him to those who, in a worldly sense, *have* no power, exactly as we have just seen St. Paul state when he talks about the weaker parts of the body being “indispensable” and treated with greater honor, which “the more respectable members do not need...” Commenting on today’s Gospel, David Lose notes that “the very fact that Jesus’ sermon is all about what God will do for the **least** of those in the world tells us that God gives *special* attention to those whom the world doesn’t want to see.” And if **God** gives special attention to those whom the world doesn’t want to see, perhaps God is calling **us** to open our eyes to these unseen ones, these “indispensable” parts of the body which Paul says are meant to be treated with “greater respect.”

Presbyterian minister and acclaimed author Frederick Buechner writes of a poignant moment early in his career when he suddenly noticed a weaker member

of the body of Christ, and instinctively realized that this “weaker” member was no different from himself. Buechner writes: “There was the day I signed the contract for that first novel that I had started in college... It was a major event for me, needless to say — the fulfillment of my wildest dreams of literary glory. But of the actual signing itself in the offices of Alfred Knopf — *who* was there and *what* was said and *how* I felt — I remember nothing. What I remember instead is leaving the publisher’s office afterwards and running into somebody in the building whom I had known slightly at college. **He** was working as a messenger boy, he told me. **I** was, as I thought, on the brink of fame and fortune. But instead of feeling any pride or sense of superior accomplishment by the comparison, I remember a great and unheralded rush of something like sadness, almost like shame. **I** had been very lucky, and he had **not** been very lucky, and the pleasure that I might have taken in what had happened to me was all but lost in the realization that nothing comparable, as far as I could see, had happened to him. I wanted to say something or do something to make it up to him, but I had no idea how or what and ended up saying nothing of any consequence at all, least of all anything about the contract that I had just signed. We simply said goodbye in the lobby, he going his way and I mine, and that was that. All I can say now is that something small but unforgettable happened inside me as the result of that chance meeting — some small flickering out of the truth that, in the long run, there can be no real joy for *anybody* until there is joy finally for us **all**...”

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Buechner had been confronted with the truth of which Paul writes: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”

“For Paul,” Richard Rohr said, “*community* is the living organism that communicates the Gospel message.” Next Sunday, at our Annual Parish Meeting, we will celebrate our life together in **this** community, and consider how this living organism which is Christ Church is being called at this point in our life together to communicate the Gospel message, with a particular concern – as God has intended – for the weaker members in the **greater** Body of Christ beyond these doors. As you pray this week for our community and our Annual Meeting, I encourage to read over and meditate on today’s Gospel and Epistle, seeking to discern the message and direction that these readings have for this living organism of which each of us is an indispensable part – this living organism we call “Christ Church.”

AMEN