

Epiphany 3C 2019 Sermon, Annual Meeting Sunday

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

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.

If anyone thinks that the Bible is an outdated book with no relevance to our world today, our Epistle readings, *last* week and this week, prove that opinion wrong. For nothing could be *more* relevant in this time when there is so much divisiveness, polarization, and dualistic thinking in our world – nothing could be more relevant than St. Paul's message in the 12th Chapter of his first letter to the Church in Corinth. For the Corinthians in Paul's day were every bit as divisive and contentious as is our world today. And Paul's message of unity in the body of Christ is every bit as important today as it was then.

"Now you are the body of Christ," Paul writes, "and individually members of it." Or as another translation reads, "Together you are the body of Christ, and parts of each other." All of us here are parts of the body of Christ we call Christ Church. Each part, each of you, is unique, with your own gifts that you bring and your own perspective, formed by your own unique personal history. And, as Paul stated in the passage we read last week, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (1 Cor. 12:7) Some of you are fantastic cooks.

Others are comfortable doing physical work – yard work, setting up the Nativity scene, or cleaning up after a luncheon. Some of you have a passion for ministering to those on the margins of our society; others are musical and love to sing in the choir. Some of you have a knack for numbers, and enjoy serving on the Finance Committee; others love serving on the Altar Guild. Still others are drawn to Centering Prayer or pastoral care. Yet, in the midst of our differing gifts and perspectives, we are all baptized into one body, and God gave all of us one Spirit to drink.

Those of you who have heard me, over the years, speak about the body of Christ, the Church, know that I am convinced that when St. Paul likens the body of Christ to a human body, he means it as more than just a loose analogy. I believe that Paul's comparison between a human body and the body of Christ, the Church, carries a far deeper, far more organic likeness. For, just as a human body cannot live without breath, so the church cannot live without the breath of the Holy Spirit.¹ Just as the blood which flows through a human body nourishes every part, so does a church's lifeblood – its worship, outreach, mutual love and prayer – nourish every part of the church. Just as the head is the “control center” of a human body, so Christ, to quote Paul, “is the head of the body, the church.”² Just as every member of a human body needs the other parts of the body, so does every member of the Church need its other members. And just as a human body is not manufactured by humans, but is a living gift and wondrous creation of God, so the Church is not something *we* create, but is a living, wondrous, organic gift of God.

The 20th Century German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book, *Life Together* (which was required reading in my seminary), wrote: “Christian brotherhood [and sisterhood] is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a **reality** created by God in Christ in which we may participate.” (pp. 30-31)

The Church, this very organic body of Christ on earth, is a gift and creation of God in which we are called to participate. And just as we can abuse our human bodies by ignoring them, or filling them with harmful substances, or not taking proper care of our bodies, so we can abuse the body of Christ, the Church, by ignoring it, not taking proper care of it, or filling it with harmful words and attitudes that damage the organic unity of the living body of Christ, God's gift and intention for us. So we must be ever-vigilant of how we are treating our fellow members of the body of Christ.

Fr. Richard Rohr once recorded a series of talks titled *Great Themes of Paul: Life as Participation*, in which he points out that, contrary to much of Christian teaching the past 500 years, St. Paul did not see his ministry primarily as “saving souls,” but rather as planting churches throughout the Mediterranean – local manifestations of the body of Christ. Fr. Rohr 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 [like the churches he

planted], then, as far as Paul is concerned, it is an unbelievable message... Paul's communities are his audiovisual aids that he can point to inside of a debauched [Roman] empire... to give credibility to his message. To people who asked, 'Why should we believe there's a new or different life possible?' Paul could say, 'Look at these people. [These churches.] They're different. This is a different social order.' In Christ, [Paul writes, both in today's Epistle and in his letter to the Galatians,] 'there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free..., but all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28, JB)."³

My friends, it is hard for us appreciate how *radical* this statement was! Jew and Greek? Slave and free? These, in Paul's day, were polar opposites – religious, social, and economic *opposites*! Today, Paul might say, "there are no more distinctions between Christian and atheist, citizen and refugee, billionaire and welfare recipient, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus." In the body of Christ, dualistic thinking and categorizing collapses, replaced by a deep spiritual consciousness of our unity in Christ, and a sense of the preciousness of each part of Christ's body, the Church.

My friends, I look out at all of you today, and though I know that some are Republican and some Democrat, some have been members of the Church for decades and some are new to the Church, some have enough money to live comfortably and some can just barely pay the rent, nonetheless I know that this is **not** the way *God* sees you – and not the way *I*, when I am most *centered*, see you. Rather, our most defining characteristic is that we are parts of one another, fellow members of the body of Christ, drinking of one Spirit, nourished by the warm flow of Christ's love pulsing into us, through us, and out into our fellow members and those beyond these walls.

My "fellow parts" of Christ's body – if I may call you that! – this divided world of ours, polarized by politics, nationality, race, religion, socio-economic class, citizenship status and more, *needs* us – needs the body of Christ – **desperately**! It needs this "reality created in God in which we participate," wherein, united as one body in Christ, drinking of one Spirit, we are enabled and empowered to live according to Jesus' example and teachings: loving our enemies and doing good to those who hate us,⁴ turning the other cheek,⁵ walking the extra mile,⁶ forgiving 70 x 7,⁷ befriending the outcast and sinners, healing sicknesses of mind and body through our ministries of Pastoral Care, Laundry Love, sheltering the homeless, giving impoverished children at El Hogar a future, and sharing the love of Christ among ourselves and with every person we meet.

My friends, my "fellow parts," our world today *desperately* needs the Church – not in the sense of the *institutional* Church, which is all too often consumed with perpetuating its own comfortable customs and beliefs; but rather the Church as the living, organic body of Christ, whose parts are uniquely gifted and different, and yet one in the one Spirit God gives us to drink. It is into this reality created by God in Christ that we are called to participate – indeed, we were made for it!

And I am so grateful that I, for the past 21 years, have had the wonderful privilege and gift of participating with you in this reality, this part of the body of Christ we call Christ Church. I truly believe that, in this divided and polarized world, we are a witness to a different way of life.

AMEN

¹ both the Hebrew and Greek words for “breath” can also be translated “spirit”

² Colossians 1:18

³ <https://cac.org/church-as-living-organism-2018-05-07/>

⁴ Luke 6:27

⁵ Matthew 5:39; Luke 6:29

⁶ Matthew 5:41

⁷ Matthew 18:22