

Sunday, 24 January 2016

[The Body of Christ- 1 Cor 12](#)



[1 Cor 12:12-31](#)

Before we talk about Paul's letter to the Corinthians, it might be helpful to say something about the city of Corinth. The city had been almost completely destroyed at one point, but by Paul's day the city had been rebuilt for about 100 years as a Roman colony. So it had the feel of a new city. There wasn't really any aristocracy because it was a recently rebuilt city that was populated mostly with Roman soldier, freedmen (which were a step above slaves on the social ladder), and slaves. It was now an important city with lots of things going on. Don't think of a sleepy backwater. This town was buzzing. There was tourism, with people coming to watch athletic competitions. There was lots of trade, which brought in lots of different people traveling from all over to do business. It had the feel of a boom town. It also had a reputation in ancient literature- to "act like a Corinthian" became a phrase meaning "to commit fornication"

(see Aristophanes (430-385 BC) who coined the term “korinthiazethai”). Plato used the phrase “Corinthian girl” to mean “prostitute”. It was a melting pot of all kinds of cultures, philosophies, and religions.

The people who made up the church brought some of this cultural baggage with them into the church. There were some strong egos in the church. There was competition and self-promotion. Some had the attitude that they could function quite fine without the rest of the community. There were some in the church who seemed to value some people’s contributions and gifts, but not others.

In lots of ways the letter to the Corinthian church has a lot to say to our culture. We are in a culture that encourages narcissism. It’s all about me, and what I deserve. That’s what the advertising we are bombarded with tells me anyway. We live in a culture that is mostly determined by economics and the markets. We are competitive, especially when it comes to toys, vacations, and houses. We are confronted by a mixture of all kinds of cultures and life styles. We are bombarded by images of sexuality and messages that tell us to follow our every desire. So, we aren’t that far off from Corinth.

In this particular part of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians Paul is trying to teach them about what it means to be the body of Christ, which is the church. There is diversity within the body of Christ, but there is a stronger unity. There is diversity based on ethnicity (Jew and gentile) and diversity based on social standing (slave and free). But, the diversity Paul is primarily concerned with here is diversity based on spiritual gifts. The

Holy Spirit has granted gifts to his people to both show God's power in their midst, but also to build up the church. He gives a number of examples of these gifts throughout this chapter (1 Cor 12).

As a side note, I just want to point out that he is giving examples here, so there are more gifts than are in this list. We know this because he seems to add to the list and gives different lists in other letters. So he's just giving examples. It's also important to be careful to not try to put these gifts into "supernatural" or "natural" categories. Paul didn't think in those terms and there are probably a "natural" and "supernatural" side to the gifts he mentions.

Okay, back to diversity. Given the diversity in the church in Corinth, he wants them to avoid two temptations. One is to look down on people as not valuable to the community, the other is to look up to someone (besides Christ) to be the savior of the community. To personalize it, one is to say, "You don't need me", and the other is to say, "I don't need you".

Paul speaks about the community as the body of Christ. When Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, he doesn't say, "Why are you persecuting my people?" or "my disciples?" He says, "Why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 8:4). As far as Paul knew, until that moment he never met Jesus. But here Jesus is telling Paul that not only have they met, but he has been being abused at the hands of Paul. This should give us pause. When we talk about the church we are not talking about a social club. It is deeper than that. If we think of the church like a club then we will act like a club. We will jockey for position. And decide

who should belong and who shouldn't. And try to get things our way, if we can. The church is not a social club. There is a deeper mystery here. When Paul mistreated a Christian he was mistreating Christ. That's true for us as well. If we mistreat a member of the church- if we make them feel like second class Christians- if we alienate them and make them feel like they don't belong- then we are doing that to Christ. To sin against a fellow Christian is to sin against Christ himself. So first, it's not just a body of Christians that we are talking about. It is the body of Christ.

A body is made up of parts (obviously). The parts have different functions. The eye is different from the ear, which is different from the foot. Sometimes we can look at a particular gift and think "wouldn't it be great if the church was full of that kind of person". Or, sometimes we can be envious of the kinds of gifts a person has and we can wish we had that gift too. Paul says that is like wishing for a body made up of eyeballs and no ears or hands. Each Christian has a gift, and is to use that gift to build up the body of Christ. We need all the gifts of the members of the body if we are going to be healthy.

There are medical experts now and in ancient Greece (like Hippocrates and Galen) who taught that pain or disability in a specific part of the body can have a detrimental effect on the whole body. The 4th century preacher John Chrysostom points out the effect on the whole body if you get a thorn in your foot. It effects the whole person. Each member of the church has an ability to effect the whole. In a similar way, the body working together harmoniously can accomplish great things and the whole body gets the credit. Imagine a runner who wins a race.

They don't give the trophy to the legs, as if the heart and lungs and eyes didn't have anything to do with it. Each member of the church has an effect on all the others. When one of us suffers, we should all suffer. When one of us accomplishes something we should all join in the joy of that accomplishment. We carry one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). We weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice (Rom 12:15).

We need all the gifts. We need preachers, teachers, givers, administrators, healers, and leaders. But, we also need the more subtle gifts. There is a theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, who says that those Christians who bring with them particular disabilities and experiences of suffering may be particularly gifted parts of the body of Christ because the church needs them to fully live out and teach the character of the gospel that has the suffering and rejected Christ at the center of it. Paul says, "the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour" (1 Cor 12:22-23). So every part matters to God. You all matter to God. So much so, that to feel you leave the church would feel like dismemberment to God. Like a limb getting pulled off, or an eye removed.

This is true of us as an individual church- St. Mary's and St. Timothy's. Each one of you brings gifts that are needed to build us up and make this church healthy. For any one of you to be mistreated means Christ feels that as if it was personally done to him.

I also think this is true as we draw the circle a bit wider. It is true of "the church in Sylvan Lake". In a sense it is more true to talk

about “the church” in Sylvan Lake rather than the “churches” of Sylvan Lake. We are all a part of the same body, and we should be careful about speaking negatively of other churches or suggesting that their voice is not necessary. For the church to be healthy we need the Pentecostal voice, and the Roman Catholic voice, and all the others. In a sense we live in a state of disobedience that we are not more unified than we are (Jn 17).

This also goes for our diocese, our denomination, and our ecumenical relationships. The worldwide church is the body of Christ, and it transcends geography and denomination. We dare not dismiss members of Christ’s body and say they aren’t valuable. We should especially not mistreat them. To do so is to mistreat Christ.

Fully participating in the body of Christ with this attitude is also preparation for living life in creation. If, in the church, we can recognize Christ in one another, then perhaps in the world we can see other people as made in the image of God. If we can see people this way, we learn to value everyone regardless of what society thinks of them, or what we think they have to offer us. Perhaps we can learn to see God’s fingerprints on the trees and the stones and the deer. If we can learn to see Christ in one another, and learn to see God’s image in other people, and learn to see the world as the work of our loving creator, then maybe the world can become a kind of sacrament where we can encounter God as we walk down the street, or look at the sky. If we can learn not to reject another member of the church, perhaps we can see everything and everyone as belonging in the world in some mysterious way. Maybe we can learn to be thankful for whatever comes to us as being not only from God, but maybe

even meant for our good.

I think Fyodor Dostoyevsky captures this when he writes, “Love people even in their sin, for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all of God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand of it. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love” (the Brothers Karamazov).

If we can learn to love within the body of Christ (seeing each other as belonging and having something valuable to offer), then perhaps that is a step towards learning this broader love. AMEN