

“The Body of Christ”

1 Corinthians 12:12 -20

Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth is an excellent example of very practical and down to earth theology. Paul addresses everyday issues within the Corinthian church and gives us a very practical vision of what Christian community ought to look like.

In chapter 5, Paul demands that an unrepentant man in the church be excommunicated, kicked out of the church, because he is sleeping with his stepmother.

On the other hand, in chapter 13, that I'm often asked to preach on during weddings, as I will this Saturday at Matt and Elsa's wedding. Paul describes the power of God's love, a love that is patient and kind, and how we are to love one another as God has loved us in Jesus Christ.

Here we see a pastor, his feet on the ground and his heart turned to God in order to motivate and inspire his congregation to a "still more excellent way."

Paul had noticed that the members of the congregation in Corinth, gifted though they were, had little sense of being part of the whole community of faith. They failed miserably at working together. Every time a decision was made about how to do ministry or how to be the church, there was argument and dissension. Because everyone had their own way of living and working, it was breaking apart the community God had created.

In the verses preceding in chapter 12, Paul says, "Who cares if you have the gift of faith, or the gift of miraculous powers, or the gift of tongues or the interpretation of tongues, if you don't know how to love your neighbor?" All those gifts without love are nothing.

Then, in our text, Paul uses the metaphor of "the body" to show us how Christians are organized in the power of God's Spirit to be both one and many. The church can be diverse in its gifts and callings and yet unified in its life in and for Christ.

For the next 5 Wednesdays, we will hear how we are the mouth, the feet, the ears, the hands, and the eyes of Christ.

We are the Body of Christ. God created us to live as a whole body with all the parts a body needs to thrive; eyes, ears, hands, feet, and mouth. But no one person runs the ministry alone. In fact, we don't run the ministry at all. God does.

The ancient Greek and Roman ideal of individualism and self-sufficiency was as prevalent in Paul's day as it is today. Then and now, we all have the tendency to focus on our own ideas and our own needs, to be individualistic Christians – each with his pet projects, each with her own idea of how the church should work, each vying for Divine attention although Divinity does better than most churches in recognizing and responding to the needs of our neighbors. Then along comes Paul with the metaphor, "We are the Body of Christ".

Again verses 12-13: "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".

Paul begins with the single identity-forming moment that all his congregational members share – baptism. Baptism is the ground of their calling into the mystery of the church. Through baptism each Christian is gifted with the Spirit and becomes a child of God knit into the fiber of the common life in Christ.

And it is the responsibility and the calling of the whole congregation to nurture the faith of each baptized child of God with the goal of none falling out of relationship with God, none becoming prodigal sons or daughters along the way.

Then Paul reminds the Corinthians that God's power has united them from very diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Through the categories of the world ((Jew/Greek, Slave/Free) may define them as separate, the power of God has broken down those dividing walls to make them one. In this the church is distinct and called out of the world to live in another reality, the reality of God's love made known to us in Christ.

At this point in the text, beginning with verse 14, Paul moves to sketch out fully the metaphor of the body. We are very diverse, each having different gifts and different jobs, and as members of the church we take advantage of our diversity, our different gifts and callings, to work together in strengthening the Body of Christ.

Paul describes different parts of the body that protest their membership in the body. Paul knows there are divisions in the congregation when some say, "I belong to Cephas" or "I belong to Apollos", or "I belong to Paul." Paul tells them that, in spite of their grumbling in the Corinthian coffee shops, they are one in Christ.

Paul also reminds them in v.18, that this unity is not by their design or volition, but that "God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose." God has ordered this diverse organism for God's own good purposes. God is sovereign over the life of the church.

Last Saturday we gathered in this sanctuary to give thanks for the life and faith of Elaine Quint. After joining Divinity in 1957, she used her God-given time and talent to serve and strengthen the body of Christ.

Elaine taught the preschool Sunday School class here for many years, teaching kids who are now my age back when there were 30 kids in a class.

Elaine often helped in the kitchen, brought food for funeral meals, volunteered in the library, sponsored new members, sent out get-well cards, and participated in many bible studies.

Elaine also wrote Lenten devotionals that were part of our annual Lenten devotional book that is available today. Elaine was committed to the Body of Christ we call Divinity Lutheran Church.

This Friday we gather to give thanks for the life and faith of John Sesock. John served on our planning council and hauled many pickup loads of furniture and day old bread to people in need including the Redeemer Crisis Center. John told me the pastor of Divinity needs a pick-up and I agreed. John was committed to the Body of Christ we call Divinity Lutheran Church.

In v.27, Paul states the lesson in a nutshell. "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it." You are the Body of Christ now! You are to behave like the Body of Christ now, both in your individual and in your congregational lives. Everyone is accountable in bringing unity to the church through the sharing of the diversity of God's gifts.

Then Paul closes our lesson by speaking of the diversity of talents in the church that are to be used to build up the Body of Christ. Whatever the gift — apostles, prophets, teachers, deeds of power, forms of assistance, leadership, speaking in tongues — in all of these gifts the church is blessed by God as we use them to live out God's love in the world.

What Paul describes is not a "me and God" world. To all who believe that spiritual maturity can come merely from "alone time with God" — walking in the woods, praying in the privacy of one's bedroom, - know that Christian faith dead-ends without the church. It's not just about "me and God." It's about being a part of the Body of Christ now.

Paul knew what physicists have been telling us for years and what we believers know in our deepest body parts – that this world is not a machine with independent and individual pieces. The world is a living, breathing body in which each part impacts the rest.

Paul challenges us as a church to be a living, breathing body of Christ whose very breath is the Holy Spirit that keeps our spirit on fire! As we make our way through the Lenten season, we focus on who we are as the Body of Christ. As Christ enters into our body in the bread and wine of Holy Communion and as we receive the sign of his cross on our foreheads, may we be strengthened to use our gifts to build up the Body of Christ as Divinity Lutheran Church.

May the peace of God . . .

#576– We All Are One in Mission – Sermon Hymn