

Together

Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

November 12, 2023

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Scripture

1 Corinthians 12:12-31b

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. 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 powerful deeds? 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.

Sermon

“Now you are the body of Christ,” wrote Paul. “Now you,” –all of you. Y’all. *All y’all*. Y’all “are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 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” (1 Cor. 12:12).

When Paul considered the church in Corinth, this was his image. Many members, one body. One body, many members. It was a body viewed as a whole, with many parts, each indispensable and equally important—a beautiful, organic, living, dynamic metaphor for the church of Jesus Christ. We're a *body*. Not a machine. Not a building. Not an institution. Not a business. A *body*.

And not just any *body*, but the body of *Christ*—the living, breathing body of the once-dead-now-risen body of God's only begotten son. And not someday, not one day when the church finally gets its act together, not when all the pews are filled and we're exhausted from all the mission we're doing, and we have more money than we know what to do with because people are giving in wild abandon—no, not that day. *This* day. Today. Not then, but *now*.

We're not on the way to becoming the body of Christ. You are, we are, you and I are, right now, the body of the Risen Christ. By virtue of your baptism, you have been grafted into the flesh of Christ. This is who you are; this is who we are together.

This is what Paul wanted the Corinthians to see when they looked at themselves in a mirror. Even if they could only see in that "mirror dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12), one day, they will discover face-to-face and know who they really are and always have been, even when their vision was obscured by a dim mirror.

Paul gives us this vision as a *gift*—and it really is sheer gift. It's a gift that every member of the body is invited to claim and share. So remember who you are; act, live, breathe like a body. Care for the body. Love the body. Really live *in* this body. Treat the body and all its members with the respect it deserves, with the honor it deserves. This is what Paul is getting at here.

And it's a truly remarkable affirmation that Paul offered them, knowing that this church was so divided and full of conflict. Corinth was a mess—it was a hot mess. Yet, despite its divisions, Paul always sees the church as whole, as already possessing a unity found in the "one Spirit" (1 Cor.12:13). To the Ephesians, Paul wrote about "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." "There is one body, and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6). One.

And because this unity in the Spirit informs how Paul sees all the members of the church, he invites them to do the same. Claim who you are *already* and live from it, he says. See the unity, the oneness of the community, because Christ is one. Christ is not divided. Right? We are body of Christ. Therefore, know that the person right beside you is essential for the work of the Church. All the members are connected, like every member of a body.

If we keep reading, chapter twelve pours into chapter thirteen, the well-known "love chapter." Without love, the members of the body go off on their own, doing their own thing with their own agendas. Without love, all becomes fragmented. Without love, one member thinks themselves better than the other instead of seeing how each member is connected to every other member. Without love, everything unravels. Without love, everything becomes

undone. Only love and grace enabled Paul to write, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor. 12:26).

Now, might take this as an obviously expression of the Christian ethic, and perhaps we take it for grant. Suffering with those who suffer; rejoice with those who rejoice. However, this was not the way Roman society was organized. To live rooted and grounded in love for one's neighbor was considered unethical; it was countercultural. And, sadly, it has become so again.

All of this makes who we are as a church, as the body of Christ, so special, holy, good, and needed in the world. And our theme for the year – belonging, connection, community—is timely and relevant. The U.S. Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, is sounding the alarm, warning us of the devastating cost of social isolation and loneliness. [1] As the church, we have something unique and special and needed in this age.

We are called to exhibit and embody the love and welcome and kindness of Christ. Will we fail? Absolutely. All the time. It's an impossible task. But we don't do this work alone. It's only through God, together with God, who gives us the energy, grace, compassion, and strength that we can even attempt to do this work. And we're in this work together—God needs us to do this work. One cannot be a disciple of Christ on one's own, only in community with other baptized Christians who also desire to be faithful to Christ. We can't do this work on our own. Individualism might be rampant in society, but here in the church, we need each other to be faithful.

It seems to me that we are being called to deepen our commitment to community, to strengthen our ties and connections as a church, modeling a way of relating to one another with humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance, bearing one another – not putting up with one another/tolerating—but bearing one another up in love, supporting one another, caring, loving, lovingly challenging one other (see Ephesians 4:2-3). We have something special to offer the world, particularly to those alone, scared, and confused. We can offer a still more excellent way. Life in community.

I am grateful for *this* community. God knows we're not perfect. There are times when we're not good to one another; we say things we later regret, and we fall short. We each have shortcomings, including me. No, we're not perfect. But do you know what? We're not called to be perfect. We are called to be faithful to Christ and one another, for together, we are the body of Christ, and together we *get* to be the body of Christ.

I am grateful for this community. I wish you could see what Dorothy and I see when we see you—the ways you love and care for each other, whether it's in prayer, through a phone call, sharing a meal, driving someone to a doctor's appointment, waiting with them for test results, just listening, being present for someone in need. I wish you could see all the ways we are church together, having fun together, laughing together, learning together, singing together, praising together, working together, putting Thanksgiving dinners together with Grace AME, meeting together, dreaming together, hoping together, being generous together, extending

welcome and inviting others into this togetherness, sharing joy, creating a safe place where children of all ages can live and thrive and grow into their full humanity, to give their lives in service to Christ and one another.

Yes, it is a good and holy and beautiful thing to see the body of Christ living and breathing together and then giving God all the glory. *Amen.*

Sources

[1] Vivek H. Murthy, "We have Become a Lonely Nation: It's Time to Fix That," The New York Times, August 17, 2023.