

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
1 Corinthians 12:12-31 (Unity Within the Body)

As we continue with Paul's letter, we see Paul persisting in working out the unity that is present and possible because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However soon after the extraordinary unity, community, and fellowship experienced during the Christmas season, we succumb to the divisions to which we have become accustomed and with which we feel comfortable.

The image of the church as a body, or more specifically as the body of Christ is well known for any of us who have grown up in the church, so much so that it might be easy to have the mistaken idea that the image of a group of people being a body is a uniquely Christian one.

If we look back, into the time leading up to Paul's letter we will find that Marcus Agrippa had already made a correlation between the state and the body, even before Christ's birth, while a contemporary of Paul's, Plutarch, uses the body imagery to speak to the plebians, the lower echelons within society, to remind them of their place as lesser members of the body – lesser than the Patricians.

Paul uses the body imagery to remind those at the top of the hierarchal pile that the lesser members of the body also have a unique and important place and should be valued for their place within the body. Paul is challenging the cultural assumptions through which hierarchy and authority were being reinforced, to present an alternate image of life lived in community with God and one another. While our tendency is to elevate certain spiritual gifts over others, Paul's words are a deliberate claim of evenhandedness and even-giftedness when it comes to how and in what ways God chooses to work through us.

For the congregation, the heart of Paul's message is that everyone who is here is connected to one another and that what each one of us has to offer matters. While we might value certain gifts more highly than others, Paul is reminding us and emphasizing the fact that the gifts we have are not our own but are given to us and therefore they are not there for our own self-gratification or glorification but for the building up of the whole.

When it comes down to it, 'church' is not a place we come on Sunday but is something that we ARE as we live, using our gifts for the building up of the whole as God intends. And, whatever it is that we offer or we think another person in the congregation may or may not offer, all of the members of the body are to be held in respect and esteem.

To be able to be the church as we are called to be takes time to get to know one another more deeply than our one hour on Sunday allows, and invites us beyond the secure boundaries that our culture has set for us.

So the imagery of the body as Paul uses it, is about reversal. In our Western, modern world we have been encouraged to see that the life and the gifts that we are given are for ourselves and for our own benefit. This might be reflected in the fact that, believe it or not,

one of the more popular songs chosen at funerals is “I did it my way,” which implies an individualism which stands in opposition to God’s love and being the body together.

The other reversal which the body imagery challenges us with, is to see beyond our faith, which is often a privatised matter. The cultural indoctrination towards individualism and the privatisation of our faith, has been exacerbated by a certain Protestant trend to view faith as a personal relationship between me and God, centred on one’s salvation.

Yet, if we are to be a church, a community in which we value each other and each other’s gifts, then speaking openly about our faith, and even our doubts within that faith, and about the gifts we offer, is part and parcel of what we should be doing as people living the faith.

Now if a visitor were to come along, one who is not a regular church goer and is interested in why we are here and what we do, thinking about how we might answer the question of why we come here becomes insightful. If someone were to ask that question and your answer was, “because I always have” or “because I like to sing” or “I like the coffee,” you have really told them very little about your faith, God, Jesus, love or hope. But maybe if you answered: ‘because I feel a sense of God’s presence in worship’ or ‘I come to grow in faith and be encouraged in my life’ or ‘I have discovered a sense of community and welcome among the people here,’ then you are opening the door to something deeper.

In giving answers such as these you may be both revealing your place within the body – and affirming the reality of God for the person to whom you are speaking. This is a reversal of the individualised and privatised view of religion so strongly held within our contemporary society which has infiltrated the church as well. In our current culture, not only do we need to learn how to speak intelligibly about God, Jesus and our faith – but we also need to remove the barriers that keep us from giving ourselves permission to do so.

The other thought on the reversal of the body imagery is in the context of the broader church. It may have been that, when Paul listed the gifts found within the body, he may have expected each house church to find those gifts located within the one community. However, what appears more likely is that Paul’s letter was addressed to a group of Christian communities within Corinth. It is entirely possible that Paul understood that the various gifts would be present across the communities – but not in every single one.

This is an important thing to reflect on as we consider our contemporary situation in which there are many different churches, and in which we as a small congregation find that we can offer only just so much and within the congregation we offer different gifts. We offer who we are and the gifts we have to the broader witness of the church, to God’s love for the world. ‘We are who we are, we can be no other.’

Some congregations offer big gatherings, some have contemporary bands and multiple styles of worship services; some are strongly committed to social justice, others to evangelism. While it is important to not have too narrow a focus in who we are, accepting

what we offer as a valid and meaningful expression of God's love is an important step along the way to living a healthy faith as a congregation.

It is important for Christians to remember that one church is no greater a part of the body of Christ than another. God equips each congregation to serve their community in various and unique ways. A large church may be quite adept at serving the poor in the city that surrounds it, by providing shelter during the cold winter nights, while the smaller church does a wonderful job nurturing new Christians, helping individuals distinguish God's call in their lives, and befriending a refugee family. Both are important members of the body of Christ, but each serves God in different ways.

So when we speak with others about who we are – we should do just that – and not speak about what we are not and apologise for those things. We are a small, vibrant and diverse community of faith who have committed to the idea and challenge of “living the faith” more meaningfully in 2022.

If our opening is always to lament about what we do not have, for example saying sorry there are not many young people or sorry there are not many families, we are failing to value our place within the body and even more importantly – we are not inviting people to see who we are and what we offer, which is ultimately not ourselves and the quality of our community but the hope we have in God found in Jesus Christ.

In this there is a reversal of the consumerist approach to our culture which constantly weighs life up with what we do not have – rather than what we already have. So the body imagery continues to reverse our thinking – and challenge us to be faithful to what God has done in drawing us to be one in the Spirit, to be the church. Ultimately we are drawn into the body so that God's love might be known not only by each other but by the whole world. The gifts we are given are for the building up of the whole, that is – the entire world.

A church runs best when everyone serves God using the spiritual gifts they have been given, gifts that align with our deepest joys and passions. In general, people seem to be happier when they are doing something they enjoy. It is ironic that we understand this to be true when seeking employment, – but struggle with it when volunteering or answering the call to ministry and service within the congregation.

The Corinthians seemed to be worried about who possessed the best gift or gifts for ministry. They were concerned about religious power and prestige. Churches today should see this as a valuable lesson as to what is really important in their missions and visions for the future. Paul writes, “But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way,” and then begins his discourse on love. The term “unity in diversity” helps to picture the kind of church Paul is describing. Whether an organization is a church or a secular business, the more diverse and different the individuals who make up the larger body, the stronger it will be.

To exist in division: to see only difference and not the unity we are able to profess because of Christ; to demand conformity without celebration of difference; is to entertain the notion of dismemberment of the body. To what extent are we able to live out fully our callings when we are not able to rely on and give support to others to live out theirs? Who we are called to be requires our fellow members of the body of Christ to embrace and embody their callings.

The real challenge of this text is to celebrate difference that is possible because of the radical claim to Christian unity. To celebrate difference finds its necessity in the history of human existence. How we reject, negotiate, and accept difference has been a constant of our collective experience. The propensity of humanity to think in categories of incongruities, irregularities, and inconsistencies exposes our extraordinary need for abundant forgiveness, and our need to claim over and over again our unity in Christ.

As the body of Christ, we are called to minister to all people, knowing that the world is often an unloving place. We believe that God values and embraces each person as a beloved child. Therefore we welcome people of every age and size, colour and culture, every sexual orientation and gender identity, socioeconomic status, marital status, ability and challenge. We welcome long-time Lutherans, Christians from every tradition, people new to faith. We welcome new visitors and old friends. We welcome all who have no church home, all who have doubts, and those who do not yet believe.

The words of Paul proclaim good news: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." Our life in this body is a gift, what we offer to one another comes to us as gift, and what we offer to the culture and world around us is bigger than who we are because it is the very grace of God revealed in Jesus and through the Spirit that is working in and through us. Amen.