

1 Corinthians 12:13-31 (NRSV)

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.

[14] Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. [15] 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. [16] 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. [17] 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? [18] But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. [19] If all were a single member, where would the body be? [20] As it is, there are many members, yet one body. [21] 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." [22] On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, [23] 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; [24] whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, [25] that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. [26] If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

[27] Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. [28] 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. [29] Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? [30] Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? [31] But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

IDENTITY CRISIS

Who are you? If you have trouble answering that question, it's called an identity crisis. We generally associate this problem with the young, but I have found that this is a question that plagues us all our life.

Who are you? Many people answer that question by giving their vocation. I'm a minister. I'm a doctor. I'm a lawyer. I'm a teacher. But, what happens when you retire, and you can no longer answer the question of identity in this way? Many retired people suffer from depression because they can no longer answer the "who are you" question with a vocation. They have an identity crisis because they no longer feel productive or useful.

Others answer the "who are you" question with a relationship. Who are you? I'm a mother. I'm a father. And that's why some people have a hard time when their children leave home. They experience the "empty nest" syndrome. Their time and effort had always been placed on doing things with and for their children. And when they no longer have that focus, the parents have an identity crisis. Sometime there are even marital problems because of this transition.

Perhaps the greatest identity crisis of all comes when a spouse dies, and we can no longer identify ourselves as a wife or a husband. Many people base their whole life upon their relationship with a spouse, and when that person is gone, a tremendous adjustment must be made in their lives. Many of you know first hand the identity crisis that takes place when this happens.

We can't avoid having an identity crisis from time to time. All of us are in a constant state of change when it comes to our identity. The "who are you" question is one that will follow us all our life, and if we have trouble answering that question, we will not be at peace with ourselves or those around us.

I think the identity question is never really answered for many people. There is a lingering sense of dissatisfaction. I think of that old popular song that asked the question in this way "Is that all there is?"

Did you see Art Buchwald's last article that he wrote to be published after his death? I had the opportunity to hear Art Buchwald speak, and he was truly one of the funniest people I have ever heard. But, Art's last word ... half serious and half joking was a quote from an old song and movie. He asked, "What's it all about Alfie?" I can just see Art chomping his cigar as he said it.

But as always there is a truth behind his satire.

When all is said and done, even when our lives have been very successful there is a sense that something more should have been done ... something more should have been said. People seem to know instinctively that there should be more to life that we were meant to play a more important role than just the ones that are thrust upon us.

YOU ARE THE BODY OF CHRIST

I believe that in some cases this desire for something more is God given. The writer of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes (3:4) put it this way, God has set “eternity in the hearts of men ...” Augustine said that we have a “God shaped hole” in our heart that cannot be filled by anything other than God’s presence.

According to the Bible we find our true identity not in the roles we play or the relationships that we have. Our true identity is found in our connection to God. Who are you? Paul wrote in our lesson for today, “You are the body of Christ.”

Like us, the church at Corinth was having trouble with this identity question. Instead of seeking their true identity in the Creator who revealed his grace and truth in Jesus, they sought hope in what they could do and achieve for themselves.

The church became yet another stage on which these people tried to build themselves up and enhance their sense of self-worth. The Christians at Corinth were all about bragging. According to the Corinthians they were the premier church of the ancient world. They had the most spiritual gifts. They had the best teaching. They had the best leaders. They had the most knowledge.

But, unfortunately, in this attempt to bolster their own self-image by bragging they were destroying one of most important gifts that God gives the Christian church. They did not have unity. They were not the body of Christ functioning in harmony; they were a collection of individuals. They were

divided over leadership, theology, and morality. They were divided by class and social standing.

Most of Paul's letters to the Corinthians are taken up by a laundry list of what they were doing wrong and why they needed to change. One commentator described the church at Corinth as Paul's worst church. They were the "poster child" for what a church shouldn't be.

And that's why the statement Paul makes in our lesson for today is so shocking. Paul says of this heresy loving people of questionable morality, who loved to brag,

"Now you are the body of Christ."

Notice that Paul didn't say you ought to be the body of Christ. Paul didn't say if you work real hard one day you might be the body of Christ. Paul said simply, "You are the body of Christ."

It's an amazing thing that Paul could say something like that about people like them. And it's also an amazing thing to say something like that about a group of people like us! And yet that's exactly the message I'm bringing you this morning. You are the body of Christ. Yes, I mean you and me as amazing as that may sound.

I know. You think that there must be some mistake, that I don't know how messed up your life really is. There's no way that this could be true of you.

Well, I've got news for you. You may think that you're the only one who's messed up, that you're the only one who has a dysfunctional life.

But, I know better. This is a church of dysfunctional people led by a dysfunctional pastor!

And God has said to us,
"You are the body of Christ."
Amazing.

POWER IN WEAKNESS

Sometimes a person that I've been trying to get to come to church will say to me something like, "Well, I do consider myself a Christian, but I just am opposed to organized religion." I want to tell them,

"Well you certainly ought to come to our church. We're about as disorganized as religion gets!"

Of course I don't say that. But maybe I should. The Bible teaches us that there's a crazy kind of power that comes from admitting our faults.

Paul told the Corinthians that instead of bragging about their strengths they should instead be bragging about their weaknesses because the message of God's powerful salvation is often conveyed best by one who is weak and struggling.

In fact God chose them not because they were "all that." God chose them because they were weak. God's power is "made perfect" not in one who is strong but in one who is weak. (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:26-39; 12:9)

So if you come here today with a poor self-image feeling torn by the struggles of life, if you not sure who you are and what you're called to be, congratulations, you're just the person we need! And you're just the person that God needs as well.

The kingdom of God, the body of Christ is not made up of perfect people. The kingdom of God, the body of Christ is made up of people who have been forgiven. And because we have been forgiven, we are free to live in a new way. By the grace of God we no longer have to live our lives trying to justify ourselves ... because God in Christ has already done that for us.

In a world that is glorifies competition and being better than someone else, we are a community that proclaims equality and cooperation. It is an equality based upon the fact that we are all saved by the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

This was the shocking thing about the Christian community in the ancient world. The old divisions no longer mattered. Paul said in verse 13 that

Jews, Greeks, slaves and free were all “baptized by the Spirit into one body.” They were all given “the one Spirit to drink.”

We might pass over that statement and not realize its importance. But, in the ancient world the divisions between Jew and Greek, slave and free ran deep. A Jew did not even enter the home of a Gentile for fear of ritual contamination. Most masters did not care about their slaves. In fact they didn't even think of them as people.

In contrast, in the early church sometimes a slave might be in charge of a house church where a former master, a new convert to the faith came to worship. Jews and Greeks ate together and worshipped together because they found a common salvation in Jesus. They were united by the Spirit of God's grace and forgiveness. It was revolutionary. They referred to those early disciples as those who had turned the world upside down. (Acts 17:6) And indeed they had done just that.

EVERYONE HAS A PART

Everyone called by the Spirit of God had an important part to play in the early church. And everyone called by the Spirit of God has an important part to play in the church today.

That's what Paul emphasized by suggesting that the church can be compared to a human body. The body is a marvelous organism made up of many different parts that work in perfect harmony. The eyes have their job to do as do the ears and so forth. It would be ridiculous to suggest that our eyes are more important than our ears or that our legs are more important than our arms. In fact when it comes to body parts all are necessary.

I don't know about you, but I would like to keep all of mine ... thank you very much. There are none that are expendable.

And if the church is like the body, then that means that all of us are important but none of us are self-sufficient. We depend upon each other. We function together to become something greater. And if you are not exercising your spiritual gift, if you are not doing what God has called you to do, then the church is less than it should be.

Did you ever complete one of those complex jigsaw puzzles only to find out that there were one or two pieces missing? I can think of nothing more disappointing.

It's the same when members of the church do not exercise their spiritual gifts.

The churches that are growing most rapidly are those churches that emphasize the identification of and use of spiritual gifts. Some folks in my Bible study even said that they had taken spiritual gift surveys that helped them identify their particular spiritual gift.

Some people think that they don't have anything to contribute to the church. If they took one of those spiritual gift surveys it would come back with a disappointing message, "Sorry but we can't identify any gift."

But, Paul tells the Corinthians and us that this just doesn't happen. We are all gifted. He tells us, "You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." Each one of you has a spiritual gift that completes the ministry we are called to do in this place. And without your gift, we have a piece missing in our puzzle.

UNITY, NOT DULL UNIFORMITY

More than that, a variety of spiritual gifts helps create a community that is interesting. Unity in the Christian faith does not mean a dull uniformity.

In society we are often encouraged to conform and be like everyone else. And sometimes in the church we are the same way. In fact there are some who say that this is the best way to grow a church. By attracting people who think the same way and are from the same social strata, there are no roadblocks to growth. The church member is seen as a consumer, a customer who is always right.

In a Doonesbury cartoon, Mike the central character was looking for a church. He interviewed the pastor of the Little Church at Walden and asked, "How did you get your church started?"

The pastor replied,

“I took a survey in the community, and they all wanted aerobics so we started an aerobics class. Then they said they all wanted basket weaving, so we started basket weaving. Then they wanted jogging, and we started jogging. And the next thing we knew we had a church. It’s getting so big now that we have a whole denomination.”

In the last frame, Mike, who knows nothing about the Gospel scratches his head and says, “So that’s how religion is spread.”

That might be a good way to grow in terms of membership, but that is not a good way to grow spiritually. I have come to believe that in a truly Christian community differences are not only tolerated but also encouraged. We do not take a poll and ask what everyone “wants.” We tell everyone that they are God’s children and that they have been given a unique gift to share with others. And then we challenge them to share their gift.

BEYOND THESE WALLS

If we do not challenge church members, they will never develop in their Christian faith. A pastor in California who has been a leader in the modern worship movement said of some people, who attend his modern, music oriented church,

“They come for the show but they refuse to grow.”

Another pastor of a large church described his people in this way, “They breeze through as though they are at a salad bar, selecting the items they want, taking nothing unpleasant or challenging and, at best, paying only the minimum.”

I think that this can be true of any church. No matter what the worship style or beliefs, there is emptiness in a church that is only concerned with what goes on within the walls of its little kingdom.

This past Wednesday the choir began practicing a song that we will sing in the near future entitled “Beyond These Walls.” And for me that summarizes this passage.

Our vision for Christian ministry must always go beyond these walls. Our vision for ministry must include rather than exclude. Our vision for Christian ministry must create opportunities for people to serve others in the name of Christ instead of always suggesting that it's just about "me" and my particular problems.

And this means that in the church we must emphasize divergent thinking instead of convergent thinking. In other words, we must change our mindset in the church. We must become radically open to the viewpoints and gifts of those who are quite different from us. We must open ourselves to a variety of options rather than always insisting on having our own way.

Indeed, in the next chapter Paul said that the greatest spiritual gift of all, the gift that we should all desire, the gift of love can be characterized in this very way. He wrote that love does not "insist on its own way." (1 Corinthians 13:5)

I'm sorry to say that this kind of love is in short supply in the church. Quite often we in the church insist on having our own way. Diversity instead of being seen as a gift is denounced as a curse, an impediment to growth.

But, I would suggest that this passage teaches us that church growth cannot be achieved at the expense of a dull uniformity. God has given each of us a gift, but in order to grow spiritually, we must use that gift for the glory of God and be open to the gifts and perspectives of others.

THE LEAST AMONG US CONTRIBUTE

We must believe that even the least among us can make a great contribution to the whole. Indeed, contrary to modern thought and practice, we must even learn to respect and give careful attention to the so called "weaker" members of the church as well as those who have more obvious and spectacular gifts. (1 Corinthians 12:22-26)

Paul tells us that we are all in this together. When one rejoices all rejoice, and when one suffers all suffer. (1 Corinthians 12:26) We are connected. We are the body of Christ, and each one of us is a part of it.

The story is told of a little girl who was sitting on the steps of a cathedral that was recently completed. A man who was passing by paused for a moment to admire the beautiful architecture. He was surprised to hear the little girl speak up. She said, "How do you like it?"

The man said, "I think it's very beautiful."
"I'm glad you like it," the little girl replied, "because I helped build it."

The man smiled and said, "You're awfully small to have had a part in the construction of such a large building. Tell me, what did you do?"

The little girl proudly announced, "My father is a bricklayer. He worked on this church; and every day he worked, I brought him his lunch."

I would love to see the whole church think like this little girl. If only we could have the eyes to see how all of us contribute to the building of the whole. And when we help build we become a part of the whole.

In the body of Christ we are all important.
And you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.
Amen.