

Only One Body of Christ

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Text: 1Corinthians 12:12-13, 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. 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....Now you are the Body of Christ and individually members of it. ~St. Paul

I came to Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1975, a brand new minister, just out Yale Divinity School. Lawrence is an old mill town north of Boston, created by Cabots and Lowells in the Nineteenth Century industrial revolution, carved out of the towns of Andover and Methuen, two much-older settlements in the Bay State. The city's hay day of industry was long past by the time I arrived but many in my congregation had grown up working as carders, dyers or weavers in the woolen and cotton mill buildings that lined the Merrimack River. It was the most ethnic place I ever lived. The Irish had built the dam on the river that made power for the mills. My congregation had been founded after the Civil War by Free Kirk immigrants from Scotland, brought there as so many others had been to work in the mills. Later waves of Italians, Poles, Lithuanians, Germans and finally people from the Caribbean came. Each brought his or her church and sometimes the pastor from the old country. There were many Protestant churches in town, founded by different ethnic and national groups of immigrants. What I was not prepared for was the national-ethnic distinctions among the Roman Catholic churches. There were Irish, Polish, French Canadian, Italian *and* Sicilian Catholic congregations: all a little different from the others. Lots of divisions, yet lots of cooperation, I discovered, too. In each congregation of this ethnic stew there were interesting traditions of eating, burying, marrying, and first communing. And just as night follows day, whoever was among the last to arrive to live in the city's triple-decker housing was looked down upon by those who had been here longer.

As I recall my experience in Lawrence those years, I think the differences were more openly acknowledged than in a place like Glen Ridge. Look for a minute at the church in Corinth. The Roman Empire was as diverse as one can imagine, with every kind of ethnic group in the known world. Corinth in modern-day Greece was built on an isthmus. If shippers coming from Italy hauled their cargoes over this narrow strip of land they saved several days of ocean travel around Greece. The city of Corinth was full of sailors, business folks and all the variety one could ever want. The Christian Church was a veritable Noah's Ark with at least two of every kind, from the world over. The most challenging relationships were probably between Jews and Gentiles, but the variety of Gentiles must have proven challenging, too. They came from various religious backgrounds, making it imperative for the church's leaders to work intentionally to disciple them. We can tell from Paul's many comments in his two letters about unity that unity

had to have been trying. The differences were obvious to everyone: Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, female, Latins, North Africans, Asians and Europeans. What a mix! Did Paul tell them to forget their differences? I cannot find anywhere he says such a thing. Indeed in today's reading it is all about how important the different members of the church are for the efficient functioning of the congregation. He did not emphasize unity over differences or differences over unity. Both are important in the church. He said, we are all different but we are part of the same body—the body of Christ—and the variety is needed to make the body work.

In Lawrence the differences were so apparent no one ever made the naïve, utopian appeal, “*Can't we just forget our differences and all get along?*” Differences were and are important in Corinth, Lawrence, and Glen Ridge. Indeed just as a body needs different parts to perform different functions and so to thrive, so does a church need people with different skills, talents and gifts to thrive. However, the natural reaction to differences is conflict. Unity is not natural. So what allows unity? Paul taught that in the church unity results from two realities:

1. The first is what we call *apostolic* unity. We recognize our grounds for being Christian in Scripture, the apostolic teaching. It does not so much matter what we individually think, as what the apostles and prophets taught. We search and discuss those teachings to find the truth. We still may have our differences of interpretation, but the Christian faith is still the one faith. There are not several gods or several Christs, only one. The one God in Christ makes us brothers and sisters. We are one family in the faith, as long as we put the faith before all other ways of looking at reality. It is not uncommon to hear utopians act as if it is easier to get along with Muslims than it is the person next to us in the pew. But this is a naïve. It is because we know the person next to us and do not know many Muslims. If we knew more Muslims, their differences would make it hard to get along with them, too. But what makes unity in the faith possible? When the apostolic faith is first, we find ways of loving the person closest to us as well as the person farthest away.
2. The second unifying reality is we call *catholicity*. When we say in the creeds we believe in the ‘holy catholic church,’ this is what we affirm. Unity is, as I said, unnatural. Division is more normal than catholicity. Here is what the word catholic means: No matter how many churches appear in the Yellow Pages, there is really only one church. Our oneness is from God, hence ‘holy.’ God is the founder and leader of the church. Though there seem to be many ‘churches,’ in reality there is only one. It is God's church not yours or mine. There is only one Body of Christ, one church, holy, catholic and apostolic.

Years ago, toward the end of my years in Lawrence, when my parents had not yet given up hope drawing me back to Texas, my father arranged an interview for me at a church in the suburb Euliss, very close to the then new Dallas-Fort Worth Airport and between the two cities.

It was destined to grow like mad as it morphed from sleepy north Texas town to a thriving, booming suburb. No one in the church was over 45 years of age. There were hundreds of children. People were making lots of money and seemed to be willing to give it abundantly to the First Christian Church. Compared to the struggles I was having in Lawrence to revitalize an old and shaky congregation, this one seemed like a snap.

The week Cyndi and I were both there, we met with a group of church leaders bigger than just the search committee. They let me introduce myself and then I took questions. One admitted that the church had a number of strong personalities in it, business folks used to getting their way. “It is hard for us to get along. What, in your opinion, is the secret of working with strong people?” he asked me. “Well,” I replied, “you have to recognize who is the real leader of the church. You have to listen carefully to what he says and rally around his leadership.” I talked this way for a few moments thinking everyone knew I was talking about Jesus. When finally I said, “Of course, the only leader of the church is Jesus Christ,” the room went silent in that odd way when you know you have hit a nerve. Later one of the search committee members told me what had happened. “We thought you were talking about yourself. Believe me, we have had so many fights we were all willing to rally around you. To tell you the truth, the name *Jesus* has not been mentioned much here during our last minister’s tenure. It was just so stunning to hear you say what was so obvious! You have to come!” As you might surmise, I declined. I went to Boothbay Harbor and then ten years later to Glen Ridge. I often wonder what my life and ministry would have been like had I gone there to be the minister. But I did not want to go to a congregation where Jesus’ name was spoken of as a distant cousin. Not that that would have stopped me from saying it and calling on him. But how often you find it in churches today! The obvious source of our unity is an afterthought, if he is thought of at all.

In many ways Corinth—though a troublesome, miss-matched set of folks—was actually an ideal church. It was a place where many people from all walks of life and many different families of origin gathered to seek Jesus Christ. They did not have to stop being who they were. They struggled to find unity. Yet, they were the body of Christ. What an exciting church! Would it not be great if we can be that kind of church, too? It is not a utopian pipe dream, but the vision of the church where Jesus is central, where we concentrate on what we believe about him and not on the different political and economic opinions that tend to divide us. It is a church that puts differences together to make a stronger, healthier people of God. This is the kind of church—*holy, catholic and apostolic*—we are called to be. I hope you will work with me in the new year to nurture, with Jesus, this kind of church. No matter how we succeed or fail, there is only one body of Christ and we are it, here, today, in this place. As in our covenant we promise, let us “be the church of Jesus Christ.”

End

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