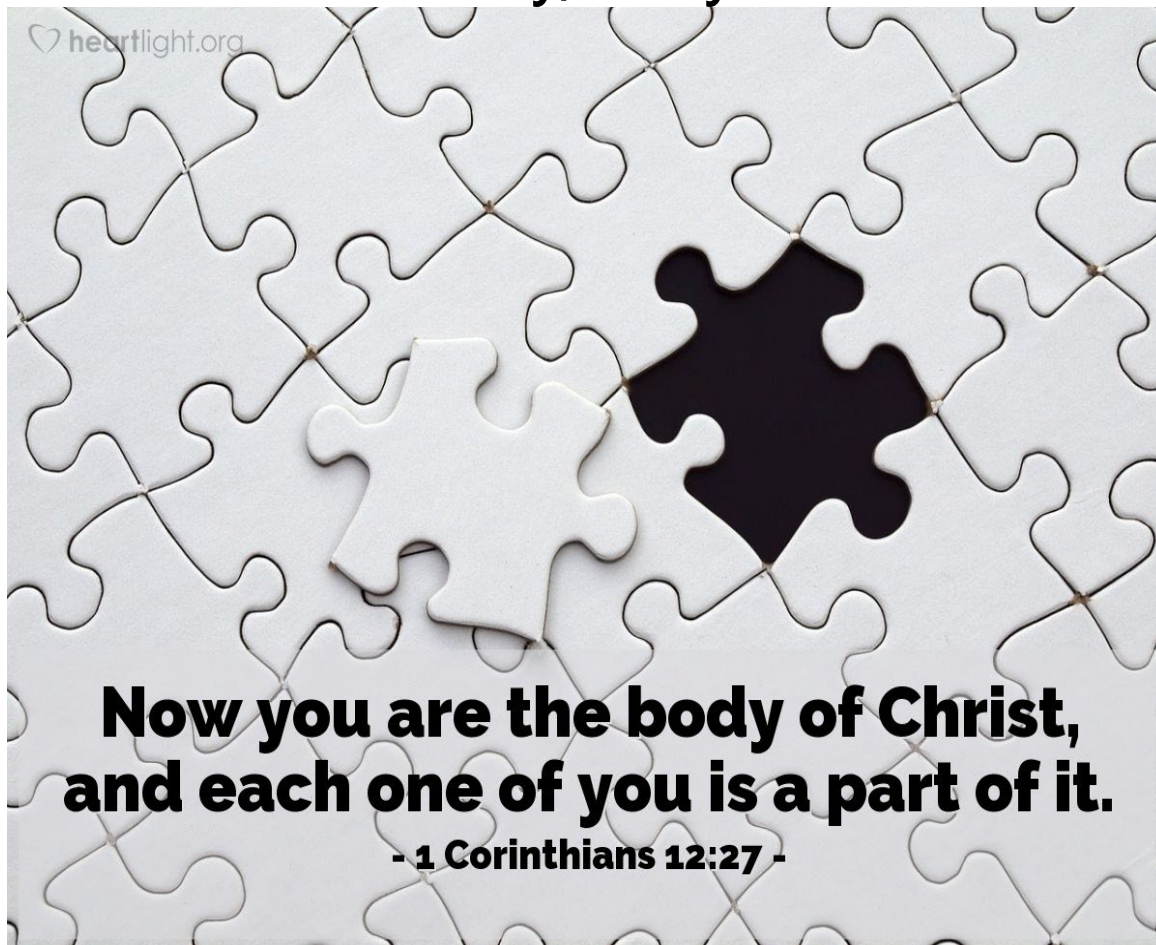


One Body, Many Gifts



I Corinthians 12:12-2, 26-27
Luke 4:14-21

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Russell Eidmann-Hicks

St. Paul was teaching Corinthians what it means to be part of a community of faith. He had gathered a very diverse group of misfits – some who were slaves and some free – some Greeks or Persians and some Jews – some women and some men; all of whom were not used to associating with each other, much less creating a worshiping community. Their surrounding society was controlled by Roman rule that was brutally hierarchical – top down – competitive, greedy, and violent. How were they to learn to treat each other as equals, with compassion and non-violence, to share their food and belongings?

Paul uses the metaphor of a body to explain simply that as a body has differing parts that make it a whole – so does the church. Just as a body has hands and feet and eyes and ears that work together as one, so does a church with people of differing

abilities, skills and backgrounds who join together to create a cooperative band of sisters and brothers. *“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)*
The church is the body of Christ.

It is a bit of a miracle that this worked – and continues to work throughout the centuries. How is it that people, who are usually quite competitive and self-centered, are able to join together in faith communities and get along? How do we manage to cooperate and support each other and work side by side to sustain our church year after year, worshiping and volunteering and sharing and giving of ourselves? How is it that our wider society, our country, our democracy, is able to function – albeit contentiously and loudly – but peacefully? It is quite a miracle.

It’s almost as miraculous as our bodies themselves. We have been given wondrous bodies formed in our mother’s wombs from DNA that has evolved over millions of years, with many of the elements within us created by supernovas – exploding stars. Our bodies are astoundingly complex. The scientist and philosopher, Sherwin Nuland said this in his address, [Brain, Mind and Spirit: The Wisdom of the Human Body](#): *“Here we are with our 75 trillion cells, it’s been estimated. There are about four million cell divisions every single second. You’re working so hard while you’re sitting here. And when cells divide — of course it’s impossible for the DNA to replicate perfectly each time, so little mistakes are made, you know, this is how mutations arise. The DNA repair-enzyme is a molecule; it’s a complex molecule. It travels like a little motorboat, up and down the DNA molecule. It finds errors, snips them out, corrects them, and puts the right thing back in there. This is the ultimate wisdom of the body.”*

So much amazing complexity works together to allow our bodies to function harmoniously. St. Paul speaks of this wisdom: *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.” (1Cor. 12:12-16)*

It’s ridiculous to imagine parts of our bodies arguing about which belongs or doesn’t belong. But too often we hear this in our society and even our churches – deciding who fits in and who is out, who belongs and who should be excluded...or deported. Paul’s larger message is a call for us as Christians to be part of the mystical body of Christ, united as one, and interdependent with others, being useful, respected, and part of the greater whole. *“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.”
(1Cor. 12:13)

The 17th century poet, John Donne reminds us: “No one is an island, entire of itself.” If one of us is suffering, we all suffer. If one of us is in trouble, we all are. If a part of my body is infected and in pain, it causes a fever in the whole system, white blood cells scurrying to the site. If one of us is mean and hurtful, it affects the whole community; and if one of us is kind, thoughtful, caring and gentle, it causes the whole community to be healthy and at peace. We are all affected by each other.

We’ve heard reports of ICE raids to deport many dozens of undocumented persons – including in a raid in Newark just last Thursday. Our nation has a right to uphold its laws and to control its borders. A majority of voters in last election clearly decided that this is what they want. What worries me is the way that our focus now is on targeting groups of people as “other,” as “less-than,” excluded from our body politic. This ‘scorched earth’ policy scapegoats certain people – immigrants, transgender kids, the homeless, the unhealthy. Every issue and crisis are becoming ammunition for attacking the others, rather than a problem to be solved together.

Too often we think of our differences as a zero-sum game, if someone else is succeeding, then we are failing; if another is popular then we feel jealous. We think in terms of winning and losing, getting ahead by stepping on others. St. Paul says, *“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?”* (1Cor12:17) It is crazy to believing that the whole body should be one limb or organ: an eye or stomach or ear or elbow. So, it is foolishness to seek one template or mold or ethnicity for our society. As people of faith we are called to fashion mutuality and unity – to value the hand or the heart working in harmony with the eye, liver, or the foot, to seek reconciliation and mutual respect.

Bishop Mariann Budde said this in her sermon last Thursday in the National Cathedral. *“Unity is not partisan. Rather unity is a way of being with one another -- that it encompasses and respects our differences that teaches us to hold multiple perspectives and life experiences as valid and worthy of respect. That enables us in our communities and in the halls of power to genuinely care for one another. Even when we disagree.”*

I was struck by how much her message mirrors the one St. Paul gave to the church in Corinth: that we are to strive for unity in community and not dismiss others because they are not like us. Diversity makes us stronger. How can we say to millions who are integrated into the life and work of our nation that we have no need of them?

An irony to me is that many of these people are essential workers, hands and feet, who are building homes, pumping our gas, mowing our lawns, taking care of our children.

I understand a decision that has been made...though I am sad that we have been unable to develop immigration legislation that would rationally solve these issues. And I worry that throughout history, when a group of people have been targeted for exclusion and being 'other', then people tend to become sadistic. They are met by hatred and violence. So, Bishop Budde pleaded, *"I ask you to have mercy."* She pleaded for those who are most vulnerable, children, the LGBTQ community, foreigners, the poor, the disabled. Our faith – if not our politics – calls us to mutual care and compassion.

Each of our gifts can be appreciated and cherished.

I once heard a talk by a pastor named Gordon Draught, a Reformed Church pastor who was called to a dying church in New York City. The building was huge, an old stone structure, but the congregation was tiny. The first Sunday he had 27 people, and the following one he had 26. He was discouraged. He said he had a vision, as he was standing across the street from the church, looking at the hand-cut stone blocks that made up the façade. He imagined that each of the stones was not a block, but a doorway, each different, each open and welcoming. In this way he went on to build his church to become a growing, thriving community in New York – with groups practicing Caribbean metal drum music, and others doing modern dance, and others organizing children's choirs or bible study groups or men's groups and women's groups. His message was that the church is meant to be a place where each part of the body is allowed to thrive, each gift welcomed. When this happens, community blossoms.

Let us each find our niche, our calling. A body needs many limbs and parts. We each have gifts that can help the common good. Instead of being offended that someone is not an 'eye' like we are, we can appreciate 'fingers' and 'toes' and 'ears' and 'brains' who have their place in the body. It is not about winning and losing, but about rejoicing in our differences and working as a whole.

Let's rejoice in our membership in this body, our church community. We celebrate the talents people bring – whether that is in music, in missions, in teaching, in leadership and organizing, in fixing things, in prayer, in worship, in friendliness. Let's care for the sufferings of others, and be enriched by the contributions each one of us brings. We are united, one to the other. *"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."*

Amen.