

A More Excellent Way
January 24, 2010
Makemie Presbyterian Church
I Corinthians 12: 12 – 31

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 the foot 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 the ear 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 God 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 miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

Strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

These are God's words for us.

On January 12, an earthquake roiled Haiti & the body of Christ went to work in a tangible & visible way. Responding to our brothers & sisters, the American Red Cross began as Clara Barton commissioned it to do in 1881 by providing disaster relief; food & health services to address basic human needs, as well as providing translation & interpretation services & maintains a database of multilingual volunteers.

But the Red Cross is not the first responder. Working with government agencies the Red Cross waits until in the case of Haiti, the U.S. military secures the airport in Port au Prince & sets in place the personnel needed to safely land relief air traffic. As the church worldwide responds to this disaster sending health kits, money & volunteers, the Red Cross feeds them. And the military helps to ensure that the predators have a measure of caution.

A story that has caught my imagination was how the Red Cross has learned to use the U.S. soldiers to prevent theft sending them immediately to known problem areas. This particular story was how looters had gone to an orphanage in Port au Prince, desperate for food & seeking to steal the children's supply; the age old story of the strong preying on the weak. But these looters were confronted not

with a group of children & a few adults, but the good old U.S.

Marines. The looters fled.

The church continues to set in place medical teams, experts, tons of food, household items & tarpaulins for the Haitians made homeless by the January earthquake. This assistance is being provided by Presbyterian Disaster Assistance partners & co-members of the ACT Alliance (All Churches Together), the body of Christ.



Survivors fill their buckets with water from a truck in the Belair neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, where the ACT Alliance is setting up water treatment and distribution systems to supply thousands of Haitian families. Photo by Paul Jeffrey/ACT.

Now the day Paul was inspired to compare the church to a human body was the day, he gave us an image of ourselves that we are still growing into. It's a strong image, because each of us is a body & we know what he is talking about. In order to pick up a glass of grape juice, it's not enough to have an arm & four fingers. Without an opposable thumb we're lost. Likewise, as some of you have shared with me, don't even think about walking with your inner ear all

messed up. It is not enough to have working legs & feet. We need our inner gyroscope to tell us which way is up.

There are all kinds of things inside of us that we need without thinking about them, at least not until one of them gets sick & has to come out. Few of us get up in the morning & thank God for our colons, our collarbones, or our stomach juices. We don't even know the names of half the things that keep us alive, but that doesn't bother them. They go right on keeping us alive in spite of our ignorance.

In general, we're pretty happy to have two of everything we are supposed to have two of & one of everything we are supposed to have one of. More or less of any of these things tends to put us at a disadvantage, either physically or psychologically. Children born with too many parts or not enough of them are scheduled for surgery & those of us who lose parts of ourselves as adults find ways to live without them, but we rarely stop missing them -- because we have built-in to us a sense of wholeness that won't go away.

Paul knew he could get people's attention by talking about their bodies. Greek & Roman orators before him had used the same image to explore the nature of the state, so the church at Corinth was used to thinking metaphorically about the human body.

What Paul & the politicians were all trying to do was to persuade people that what was true inside their own skin was also true outside of it, that wholeness was matter of many different parts all being themselves & doing their jobs. Unity & diversity were not contradictory terms, in other words. They were two true words for one paradoxical reality, namely, that our survival depends not on our sameness but on our infinite variety.

Okay, now that's fine when it is my liver or my kneecaps we're talking about. I rejoice in the difference between them & I wouldn't want either of them trying to do the other's job. I count on all my parts to maintain their independence while they are working together, but the truth is that I don't think about them very much. It is all *me* here, & I'm largely unconscious of the intricate cooperation required to keep *me* alive.

The problem begins when you put me in community with a bunch of other people who look, smell, think, talk, & act differently from me. One is perfectly cheerful but she can talk for thirty minutes straight without stopping to breathe, while another has been so beaten up by life that everything she says comes out as a sneer.

One speaks so intimately of God that everyone around him feels like a spiritual slouch & another is a complete imposter, who prays big hot air balloons on Sunday mornings & then goes home to knock back several drinks, until in rage he explodes against his family.

“Now you are the body of Christ,” Paul says, “and individually members of it.”

I liked it better when we were talking about livers & kneecaps. Why? Because I do not handle the infinite variety outside of me nearly as well as I handle the infinite variety inside of me. Because other might people challenge my established routines. I start doing something one way & suddenly I get lots of advice about doing it another way, or several other ways, until I lose my appetite for doing anything at all.

Do you know what I mean? We join a community looking for – what – closeness, support, some measure of safety – and nine times out of ten what we get instead is this holy struggle to live & work with people who are just as angular as we are. The brains want everybody to act like brains & the hearts want everyone to act like hearts & there is always a hangnail who brings out the hangnail in everyone else.

In his book *The Company of Strangers*, Parker Palmer defines community as “that place where the person you least want to live with always lives!”

And, he adds, when that person moves away someone else always arrives to fill the empty place. Most of us have a romantic notion of community that gets in our way, because the real purpose of community is not to retreat someplace with other like-minded people, but to give ourselves up to the working of the Holy Spirit by learning how to live with people we may not like even a little bit. What better way to open ourselves up to the God beyond our knowing than to begin with the neighbor beyond our knowing? What finer way to learn about the reconciling power of Christ than to test it in a body of infinite variety?

One difficulty with Paul’s metaphor, for me, is that I cannot feel it, not the way I can feel my own fingers & toes. He says that when one of us suffers we all suffer together, & when one of us is honored the rest of us rejoice— but it doesn’t seem to work that way very often. Oh, we may feel sorry for each other or glad for each other, but if someone hits you my skin does not bruise & when you get a raise my standard of living does not go up. For all of Paul’s good intentions &

excellent theology, his metaphor really doesn't work. One member suffers & the vast majority might not even know about it, much less feel it. One member is honored & the rest of us may applaud, but we rarely experience the joy as if it were our own.

But what if Paul was not speaking metaphorically when he wrote about the body? What if he was speaking metaphysically instead – not making a comparison at all but stating a solid reality? He did not say, “You are *like* the body of Christ,” after all.

“You *are*,” he said. “You *are* the body of Christ & individually members of it.” Whether we realize it or not, whether we feel it or not, whether we like each other or not, we are the body of Christ & there is nothing we can do about it but act like it or not.

Quantum physicists tell us that we have been living under the illusion of separateness for at least five hundred years now, ever since Sir Isaac Newton proposed that the universe worked like a great clock. According to his physics, the world is a collection of individual gears & springs that act in perfectly predictable ways. We can take them apart & put them back together again with no effect on the whole. To understand the clock, we need only understand the parts, which behave in regular & reasonable ways.

It was not until the discovery of subatomic reality in the twentieth century that this illusion was dispelled. In fact, we learned, the universe behaves much more like a body than a clock. It's not possible to understand the parts without understanding the whole. We cannot even observe an electron without changing the way it acts, because we are all knit together in this invisible unfathomable web of relationship. It has its own gorgeous order but is never entirely predictable, because every time a butterfly beats its wings in that web, every time a cat yawns or a baby sneezes, the whole web shifts to accommodate it. Quantum physicists call this the chaos theory.

Paul calls it the body of Christ – that great mystery of God that binds us together whether we know it, feel it, or like it or not.

So what of God is in this for me? And why do we always have this awful need to have other people see things the way we do? Why are we scared of being alone in what we feel?

Because if what Paul said is true – the people gathered in a devastated Haiti are members of my own body. But isn't this a little hard to accept? It's hard for me to accept.

Is my struggle irrelevant? Because if what Paul said is true – then God is not waiting for any of us to decide who is in or out of Christ's body, not even ourselves.

Isn't this truth beyond our consent or liking? We are the body of Christ & individually members of it. Whenever anyone laughs, cries, lives, or dies in the web of creation we are all affected by it whether we know it or not. When one suffers we all suffer & when one is honored all the rest of us rejoice & isn't this the more excellent way, that Paul wants to show us?

That the creator of all our parts, the author of our wholeness, the lover of complete impostors, the Lord of electrons, the one who created our world & you & me. The One who wants to show us a more excellent way; by turning you & me & them, into us. Amen.