

Members of the Body  
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I Corinthians 12:12-31a

A church I served in Chicago was located near Moody Bible Institute. You could tell a Moody student, because they would approach you very intently after church, Bible in hand, ready to take on a theological point you had made in a sermon. You kind of had to brace yourself, but you also kind of welcomed it – most times.

Ours is a biblical tradition, though we don't bring our Bibles to church with us because we have them in our pews already. So I'd like to do something a little different today, and invite you to find the Bible in the pew in front of you, and turn to page 174. I Corinthians 12. We read a portion of it last Sunday and we read a portion of it just now, but I'd like to take a deeper dive because Paul's words, written to a small church, facing conflict and division, facing the hardships and challenges of getting established, could truthfully and powerfully have been written to us – to us the 21<sup>st</sup> century church, to us the Presbyterian church, to us a Rochester church, to us Third Presbyterian Church.

We won't re-read verses 1-11, but do note the topic. Spiritual gifts, the interaction between the Spirit and the common calling we share and the unique calling each of us has been given. There are varieties of gifts, Paul says in verse 4, but the same Spirit. And there are different ways of serving God, so many different ways of serving God. But always it is God who is served. And there are many forms of service, but it is always God who "activates" them, who gives us ability and capacity. That is good news on so many levels – for each of us, for all of us.

Then from verses 7 through 10 Paul lays out a litany of gifts. Some of the gifts correspond most naturally to 2016; some not as much. We need *all* of those gifts, now and *each* of those gifts, now. We need people who can help understand where the Spirit is calling us. We need people who can help get us there once that understanding has been articulated. We need visionaries, and we need practitioners. We need organizers. We need doers. We need introverts. We need extroverts. We need those with decades-long faith. We need those with newly-born faith. We need those who can sing and those who can't carry a tune in a bucket. We need – to put a finer point on it – elders and deacons and trustees, cooks and bakers, teachers, singers and ringers, committee members, ushers, greeters, teachers, advisors. We need people with big ideas and we need people to can get those big ideas happening.

This is good news...when we look around we discover that all of us have a gift given by the Spirit. If you don't know what your gift is, or are unsure that you have been given one, the task becomes one of discovery and discernment, together, in community.

There is a human shadow side to all of this, of course, one worth spending a moment or two considering. It is our human tendency to forget all of this, or neglect it, or even to reject it, to revert to cliques or tribes that place one group above another, and therefore another group below, or, on an individual level, to assert superiority and therefore establish inferiority. Paul would have none of it; in fact, that's one of the primary reasons this letter was written in the first place. Using the image of a symphony, N.T. Wright writes that Paul saw a danger that "the whole symphony might be played out of balance and even out of tune." Says Wright: "...there are indeed different instruments, but all require the same musicianship; there are different styles of playing, but they're all following the same conductor." (*Paul for Everyone: I Corinthians*, page 154)

That is what we must remember, both as we look around, and as we look into our own souls. The Holy Spirit is the great leveler and the great equalizer, whose work is never to bring anyone down, but always to raise up, so that our task is to identify our own giftedness and to identify the giftedness of others. The Greek word is *charismata*, a deeper understanding than we have of the word "charisma."

What we must remember always is what Paul insists to us, that these gifts are not human achievements, but are given to all of us, by the Spirit. Richard Hays writes that "All members of the community receive gifts of the Spirit, not just a few leaders or spiritually super-endowed prodigies; furthermore, the whole purpose of God's distribution of these gifts is for the benefit of the community as a whole, not merely the private edification of the individuals who receive the gifts." (*First Corinthians*, page 211) It is a "remarkable" vision of the church, Hays asserts: "(where) 'each one' is empowered by the Spirit with one of these extraordinary gifts (and) the church as a whole is envisioned as a charismatic community in which the power of the Holy Spirit is palpably present, operating through the complementary gifts of its various members." (212)

But Paul is just getting started. He now transitions into a timeless and enduring description of who we are and why we are who we are. In using the image of the body, there is no mistaking what Paul has been saying, which becomes a challenge for us, to be sure, but even more so a remarkable opportunity.

A body, Paul says in verse 12, has many members, many parts. But it is ONE body. One. So it is with the body of Christ. Baptism, in verse 13, becomes the entry point. Not credentials. Not abilities. Baptism. Paul's insistence that Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, are all part of the body because of baptism, means that we must do the same when thinking about groups and categories today.

There are so many trajectories launched from these brief words. One would be for us to look around this place to see who is here and who is not, and what gifts are being claimed and what gifts are yet to be discovered. Brian Petersen writes that “few of our churches reflect the ethnic, social, and economic diversity of the neighborhoods around them. Our congregations are often very homogenous, and we are, sadly, comfortable with that.” Petersen asks “what, in our context, corresponds to the culturally-divided pairs mentioned in verse 13. Where do we find the human polarities now overcome in baptism, and brought to surprising and profound unity in Christ?” That is one trajectory. Another: my primary argument about ordination equality is less about the people being ordained, but about the Spirit doing the calling. It would be contrary to what we understand about the Spirit and baptism to preemptively disqualify whole categories of people who are, by grace, members of the ONE body.

And to that body. In verses 14 through 26 Paul paints a glorious and evocative portrait of what this is. Unity and diversity. One body and many parts.

All matter, whether they think it or not.

- Hands. Ears. Eyes.
- Kenyans. Americans.
- Rich. Poor.
- Brighton Church. Third Church.
- Young. Old.
- Physically challenged. Able-bodied.
- Refugees. Native born.
- Liberals. Conservatives.
- Urban. Rural.
- Black. White.
- Especially in this moment. Black. White.

You supply the ways that we divide, and Paul will insist the very same thing: all; one body; many parts.

There is a practical logic to it, of course. Paul says in verse 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?” We need diversity to be who we are fully called to be. We couldn’t get anything done if we were all one thing or another.

But it is more than practical. It is beautiful.

And it is faithful. Richard Hays writes that this “body” language would have been familiar to the Corinthian readers. But Paul does something different with it. Rather than to “urge members of the subordinate classes to stay in their places in the social order and not to upset the natural equilibrium of the body...Paul uses the body image...to argue for the need of diversity in the body, and, at the same time, interdependence among the members. (213)

We know what that looks like. How many of you who have had a hip replacement know that the soreness of your hip area affects how your whole body feels. And when that replacement happens, how good your whole body feels. No body part works on its own.

Look at verses 18 and following, not only for a wondrously functional design, but a remarkably beautiful one as well. Diversity for diversity’s sake is interesting. Diversity in the name of interdependence is another story altogether. An eye uniquely an eye, offering sight to the whole. The head. The foot. And the body parts that Paul might not even have known about – organs and muscles and cells – all needed in their uniqueness and all critical for our interdependence.

That is the way that God has arranged the body. That is the way that God has arranged the church. Weakness and strength interwoven into a beautiful indispensability, a beautiful unity, so that, as Paul insists in verses 25 and 26, “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.”

A church member is so much more than “one who belongs.” A church member is part of the body, the body of the church, the body of Christ.

This is not about church organization, but about baptism. And it is about resurrection. That is why the body language, so to speak, is not an illustration, but an affirmation of faith.

Paul ties our two portions back together, writing in verse 27 that “you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

And he makes one more plea for unity and diversity, of the interdependence of our gifts and giftedness. No more than a choir would be all sopranos, or a baseball team all shortstops, we need every varied gift for the church to be the church. We are not all one thing. But we are all some thing.

“Community” has something to do with body and duty and obligation and gift, which means that we both give and receive these spiritual gifts for the common good.

Paul’s vision inverts nearly everything we think about everything, including how we locate ourselves in the world and in our communities. As each of us lives our own lives, and as we ponder who we are as this community of faith, how can we re-define all of these understandings? Weak and strong. Poor and rich. Foolish and wise. So that we can be the church we are fully called to be, the baptized body that is the church, and the resurrected body that is Christ himself, calling, sending, loving. Together. Amen.

