

“What a Body!” – 1 Cor 12:12-31a

Before I begin this morning, I feel compelled to explain a bit about the selection of the lectionary text upon which to preach. This week and next week the gospel readings from Luke are two halves of a single incident, and so to preach on the gospel text would mean you would get a “to be continued ...” sermon this week, with the conclusion next week. Now that’s not all bad, as if successful might persuade some to come next week, but few of us, perhaps me especially, have an attention span that would cover a weeklong break. And so I’ve decided to preach on the 1 Corinthians text this week, and the whole combined Luke passage next week.

In and of itself, that wouldn’t normally require any explanation. However, the combination of switching to the epistle reading as the subject for this sermon, coupled with the particular epistle text, might well cause at least some of you to wonder if I was trying to address a situation of conflict within our congregation. Let me assure you – I’m not. At least, I don’t think I am. I’m pretty sure I’m not. Maybe after the service those of you who agree with me could assemble in the hall, and those who don’t agree could gather in the parking lot!

Seriously, though, this text is one of the classic texts used by ministers to address a situation of conflict in a congregation, and for good reason – because that’s what Paul was doing. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians – well, it was at least his second, really, but since it’s the first one we have we call it First Corinthians – was written largely to deal with a situation of conflict in that early congregation. Right at the opening, immediately following the standard “I give thanks to my God always for you...” Paul appeals in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ that “all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose”. Word had come to Paul from some of Chloe’s people that the congregation was significantly divided on a number of issues, and from his charge to them it appears as though the divisions had coagulated along the lines of teaching offered by several different evangelizers. Groups within the congregation had apparently begun to identify themselves as followers of Apollos, Cephas or Paul, and of course some attempted to rise above the fray by declaring themselves to be followers of Christ.

And while there was a faction that argued about the supremacy of wisdom over the gospel, for the most part the divisions were not merely esoteric arguments about doctrine or theology or Christology or any other ‘ology’. The differences were manifest in very practical ways, indeed in practices of what to eat or not to eat; whether or not to hang out with those who are immoral, greedy, idolaters, revelers, drunkards or robbers; differences that seemed to even have escalated to lawsuits between the believers!

I suppose we shouldn’t be too shocked that divisions appeared so early in the life of the church, especially when we see how such divisions have continued unabated from Day One until now. Denominations, sects, subgroups, splits, mergers, re-splits, the church as a whole and individual units within the church have experienced divisions throughout their entire history. Some of those divisions have been gentle, others have been instituted through bloodlust, warfare and torture (is there such a word as ‘denomicide’?) Controversies rage unchecked today, with passions running as deep as only faith can go, and with people barricading themselves behind the fundamentals of their beliefs, tossing fiery accusations like Molotov Cocktails (those bottles filled with gasoline and with burning wicks).

At the heart of this problem lies the tension, the struggle, between “the one and the many”. We are called to be one in Christ, as we acknowledge and proclaim his sacrifice upon the cross was for all who would accept the redemption he offered, yet we are undeniably different as individuals, with unique and separate gifts given by God, activated by the Holy Spirit. As we gather in congregations and denominations we come together at the intersection of One Way and Different Paths, and there is an inevitable tension there between the desire to be one and the natural urge to be different.

Tension in itself is not necessarily a problem. Such tension, when properly understood and lived, can be the inspiration for great creativity and interest and excitement. However, when badly managed or worse yet fostered into division, can and does result in hostility, anger, and conflict. Whether open warfare or subversive guerilla action, that kind of conflict is both destructive and self-destructive, and most often results not only in the collapse and destruction of a congregation but also in the driving away of people from faith in Christ.

The problem then is not the tension between the one and the many, but in understanding the tension and managing it properly. Paul uses a common idiom of his own day to provide a model for understanding that inevitable tension, namely the model of the human body. It was a model with which all the congregation in Corinth would be familiar, as it was commonly used in those days especially to describe the diverse political alignments and structures in place. In a hugely familiar, yet often forgotten or ignored model, Paul points out how our bodies are complex systems, made up of many different components, all of which play an important role. We can (perhaps as he hoped his readers in Corinth would) even laugh as we share with him some bizarre images, such as a talking foot declaring that it was not going to participate because it was not a hand. Mind you, it is easier some days than others to believe that certain parts of the body, like sore feet, weak knees, aching backs, arthritic shoulders, can and do protest loudly. But Paul's examples of talking feet and complaining ears provide us with cartoon-like images, and we can chuckle along with him over these pictures.

But Paul's example of the body as a model, justifying the need for different parts to make up part of the whole, is only part of his argument. Recall that he has just finished describing to the people of Corinth in his letter how God has blessed people with "varieties of gifts ... manifestations of the Spirit for the common good" as he puts it. Gifts such as utterance of wisdom, utterance of knowledge, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discernment, and different kinds of tongues.

Paul then puts these two understandings together, joins the 'one and the many' in the church as the body of Christ. "You are the body of Christ, and individually members of it", he declares, and what a body it is! Heads and toes, hands and elbows, what a glorious collection of disparate people make up a congregation, especially a congregation like Central. Paul goes on not only to list the parts that make up the body of Christ, but he assigns priorities to each of those parts. "First", he says, "God has appointed apostles, second prophets, third teachers", and so forth. At first glance this is a bit odd, because he has just turned the idea of the individual importance of each part upside down in his example using the human body as a prototype. Recall his words, "On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable." Yet here he is clearly ranking the gifts and the skills associated with individuals. What's happening?

Well, I think Paul is dealing with two different issues, and is covering both with the same example. On the one hand is the issue of the tension between the one and the many, the body of Christ made up of individuals each gifted with God-given talents and skills. On the other hand, once he validates the different skills and gifts of each person, there arises the subsequent problem of people wanting to rank those gifts and skills, to put them in an order of importance. It seems clear enough both from what Paul says here and in the need for a second letter that not only was the congregation there divided, the division was fostered or fueled by a sense of "my gifts are more important than your gifts". I know it sounds like a school-yard scrap, and as much as we would dearly love to be able to claim that we, as faithful followers of Christ and part of the body of Christ, are well above such puerile proceedings. However, the evidence that such was happening in Corinth was clear, and unfortunately the evidence is all too clear that the same kind of nonsense continues in congregations, in denominations, and within the universal church as a whole. Whether overtly declared, or acted out, the

claim that “my faith is purer and righter than yours” seems to not only ignore but contradict what is said here in scripture.

The evidence is clear enough that a significant number of the Corinthian church members considered the gift of tongues to be the supreme gift of the Spirit, and it is interesting to note that Paul places that gift last, below even the gift of administration in his ranking. Even with such an injunction it took a while for the church there to settle down, but they seemed to have gotten it together, and the congregation throbbed as a vibrant part of the body of Christ.

The same is true for the church today. Perhaps we can extend Paul’s analogy of the body to include the various aches and pains and dysfunctional parts that are reflected in the body of Christ as we know and live and experience it. The parallel continues to be useful, as we recognize how the roles that medicine, both traditional and scientific, play in restoring and maintaining health in the human body have their counterparts in the church body. Cancers do start up and grow, and need to be excised sometimes with surgical precision, other times with massive doses of chemical and nuclear treatments. More often the hurts are temporary, and require only rest and gentle exercise. Healing is often necessary in the body of Christ just as in our own bodies, and God does provide that healing through the Spirit just as he does with us.

“We are the body of Christ, and individually members of it”, Paul tells the people of Corinth, and tells us as well. And what a body it is! Diverse, unwieldy, complex. But powerful also, especially when all the parts are working in harmony and unison. Incredibly powerful when all the parts are in tune with the Holy Spirit. Paul goes on from this example to describe the glorious glue that brings all this together in the passage that we all recognize, his famous “love is patient, love is kind” description. But for the moment, let us once again reabsorb his image of us, unique individuals with differing gifts, joined together in one harmonious whole as the body of Christ, pulling together, working together to proclaim the love and grace of God active in our lives through Christ’s sacrifice, and through the gift of the Holy Spirit, together as one in the service of the One God.