

One and Many

The Third Sunday of Epiphany C

27 January 2019

In the section of 1 Corinthians that we just heard, St Paul uses a lot of vivid, figurative language, some of it evoking humorous or absurd images, to drive home his point and make it memorable. He does not want us to forget that collectively we, as members of a Christian community, in this case the gathered community of Church of the Redeemer, have also become the members of a body, and that body is in some sense Christ. Like the limbs and organs of the human body, we have become interdependent on one another, whether in good times or in bad.

We have been having some hard times lately, the kind that threaten the unity of any community, and we have done a good job of coming together and acting as one body. To help us face the challenges ahead, I think we should give some careful study to what Paul, an experienced church builder, had to say to the people of Corinth so many years ago.

Corinth was a major seaport, and it had the reputation of being one of the roughest, toughest ports in the Mediterranean – with people, both residents and transients, to match. In short, to use a modern comparison, the Port of Corinth was the Mos Eisley Spaceport of its day and there was reputed to be no more wretched hive of scum and villainy. But St Paul managed, with the help of his mission team and committed converts, to start churches there. They seem to have argued a great deal though, and about everything. There was even a My-Baptism-Is-Better-Than-Yours argument, among people who imagined they were somehow better or more important because of who had baptised them!

It is no wonder then that unity is an important part of the message that Paul sends them. But he does not forget the importance of diversity either: he begins by saying:

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.

Paul makes two points of particular importance to us here. One is to associate the body of which we are all organs and limbs and other members with Christ, as though that idea (of the gathered community being Christ) needs no explanation. Presumably Paul had discussed this with the Corinthian communities during his time with them. We know something about it from other passages, both elsewhere in this letter and in others, in which he discussed the gathered community as Christ's body. We often refer to this teaching by calling it Christ's mystical, or spiritual, body. But it is quite important, indeed fundamental, to our identity as a community to know that by become part of this gathered community we become Christ's body in the world. Not just we ourselves but Christ also will be judged by how we act in that capacity.

The other important point is the idea that in our baptism we were made part of this one body and that we were all nourished by the Holy Spirit in our baptism. So being part of this body, being Christ to the world, is what we signed up for when we were baptised – we don't get to decline the assignment because it is tough (which it is) or may make us unpopular (which it may). But the good news is that we are strengthened by the Holy Spirit to do Christ's work. We will definitely need the Spirit in our hearts and in our lives to carry through on this, including in discerning exactly what that work is and how we are Christ to the world. Hint: it involves showing God's love to people at the margins, or in trouble, or in need....

Paul continues on to use a series of bizarre and humorous pictures to make his point that we need one another to do our work as Christ's body just as the human body needs all its organs, limbs, and systems to be a functioning body. The talking foot and ear, who try to skive off because they are not a hand or an eye, respectively, are hard to forget. But the most lasting of these images is surely that of the body that is all one big eye!

In this way Paul makes us aware that, like the body, the gathered community is necessarily made up of many members, each one with its own unique and necessary part to play. We can't all be the hands and eyes of the community; where would we be without feet and ears, after all? As Paul concludes, "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.'".

He then goes on to make an argument on the basis of honour and shame, always of great importance in the late ancient Mediterranean world of which he and all his early hearers and readers were a part:

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 honourable we

clothe with greater honour, 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 honour to the inferior member...

In this way, Paul subverted the entire point of the honour/shame ranking: the lesser members are in fact indispensable, and so not less in any real way. The less honourable (he means what we still refer to as private parts, like genitalia) are clothed with honour and so brought up to the same level of honour as any other part of the body. In fact, the so-called inferior parts are given greater honour by God God's self.

Having thus turned the underpinning of his whole culture on its head, Paul turns away from the human body to Christ's body as he goes on to explain that God acts in this way so "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 honoured, all rejoice together with it." Without any cause left for dissension (apparently the greatest collective fault of the Corinthian believers), the members of Christ's body are free to care equally for one another, sharing both in one another's suffering and in one another's joy.

Only now can Paul start to talk to the Corinthians (and us) about spiritual gifts. First it was necessary to establish the interdependence and unity of the body, made up as it is of diverse parts, limbs, and systems, that is, to establish the interdependence of the believers making up the gathered communities which are Christ's body in every place. It would not have been wise to speak about spiritual gifts earlier, or they (and we) would have been tempted to rank the recipients in importance according to the gift that each one had received.

A full discussion of the charismatic gifts is beyond the scope of our reading this morning. But Paul does list some of the most important of them here. Some of them are rather unexpected,

like assistance and leadership, and the ranking is also not what we would expect: teaching comes before miracles or healing? But we can now understand that there are diversities of gifts but the same Spirit, because Paul has taught us that we were all baptised into one body and we are all filled with the same Spirit. One member is not better than another because of the gift they have received any more than the foot is more important than the hand. We need each other, and one another's gifts, so that Christ's body at this particular corner of Toronto can do God's work in the world.

Some of us bring gifts of leadership or organisation to the table. Others bring hospitality. Others bring eloquence. Some, fellowship. I could go on in this vein forever because there are as many gifts as the body has members and we are all needed to offer our time, talent, and treasure to the work of that body. Right now our body has sustained a blow from the archbishop's announcement before Christmas. Fortunately we have had wonderful lay leaders and clergy to cushion the blow and help us through. That was their gifts in action for the good of the whole body. Practically we also needed to pull together and meet the budget because we can't do the Kingdom's work without cash - and the will and capacity to give is another gift from the Spirit - and we not just met but slightly exceeded the budget.

All this shows that, despite the blow, we are finding ways to work together as Christ's body at this corner. Let us pray for the grace to continue in that work, together, as members of one body, filled with the Spirit's gifts. Amen.