

Members of the Body

3rd Sunday after the Epiphany –I Corinthians 12: 12-27

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, January 24, 2016

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

How often have you heard someone say, "I can worship God better in nature than I can in church?" Though it's more frequent when there's conflict going on, I can't tell you how often I hear someone express the idea that the rest of the congregation gets in the way of our worship, of our contact with God. "It would be much easier to serve God," I've actually heard it said, "if I didn't have to deal with all these *people*."

With our understanding of ourselves firmly rooted in Greek and Roman classical thought, thoroughly filtered through the Renaissance and Reformation, and again through the Enlightenment and modernism, and seasoned with good ol' American individualism, we have trouble with that way of thinking. We look at ourselves and others as separate, distinct individuals, most completely *ourselves* when we stand alone, uncommitted, uninvolved, uncluttered by other relationships, each of us personally responsible for our actions, for our faith, and most especially, for our relationship with God.

The Bible, however, never really sees individuals outside community. Abraham was called out for the express purpose of being the father of a people. Moses was called for the express purpose of leading the People of God out of slavery into the Promised Land. Deborah, David, Daniel, all those heroes you learned about in Sunday School, their flannel-graph and coloring paper Bible stories only *mean* something in terms of how they were a part of the community of God's people.

In this morning's Epistle reading, Paul found a beautiful way to talk about that very thing. Paul said the Church is a body – the body of *Christ*. Because it is a body, Paul said, the Church is, by *necessity*, made of many different parts, each with a different, but *vital* function. As in *any* body, in the Church, diversity of form and function are a matter of survival. An eye can't say to the foot, Paul says, "I don't need you." An ear can't say to the hand, "I don't need you." Every part of the body needs every *other* part. Without each and every one, each and every part, doing what it was called to do, the body will be incomplete, the body will suffer, eventually, the body will die.

I like that. I like that image of the Church as the Body of Christ. Partly because I, too, am thoroughly immersed in American individualism, I really like that we each have a role to play in the Body of Christ. The problem is that too often, we forget that the reason that the Body of Christ is made up of many members, is for the *life* of the Body.

Because of that, we sometimes have trouble figuring out which part we are. Every now and then, as part of one of our adult ed programs we do some sort of "spiritual gifts inventory" to help determine what gift or gifts each participant has been given by the Holy Spirit. The guiding principle of that sort of program is that the only way to discern your spiritual gifts is through prayer. Imagine that! If you want to know what someone has in store for you, the best thing to do is to *ask* them. We need to pray. I don't mean just the "Our Father" and the confession and the post-Communion prayer. I mean we need to engage, both individually and corporately, in prayer that asks God to show us his will, and then genuinely *listen* for his answer. We don't do enough of that kind of praying most of the time, so it should come as no surprise when we get a little confused, a little disoriented about his will for us. To get past this confusion, this disorientation, this roadblock, to figure out what part we have been given to play in the Body of Christ, we need to *ask*, fully expecting an answer.

Perhaps a bigger problem for many of us in the Body of Christ, is that even if we have some idea about what part we have been called to be, we really, *really* want to be some *other* part. That's not a new problem in the Church. After all, that's precisely why Paul wrote his letter to the church in Corinth. They were a good bunch of Christian folk, with lots of diversity, lots of ways of looking at things, lots of gifts. And every one of them thought that the gift *they* had been given was the one that the Church really needed. The problem *then*, as it sometimes is today, is that everyone thinks they ought to be the head. "If

people would just realize that my way is best,” we sometimes say, but only to ourselves, of course, “things would run much better.” It’s human nature to think that my way is the only way, or at least, my way is the *best* way. The problem is that the Body of Christ doesn’t need two heads and the job is already taken. If we lose track of the surety that Christ *himself* is our head, if we lose track of the certainty that we follow where *he* leads, if we lose track of the absolute conviction that leadership in the Church involves servanthood, rather than assertion or direction or manipulation, then we are setting ourselves up for disaster.

We also sometimes run into trouble because we’d like to be the part of the Body of Christ that does nothing at all. For some who end up going this way, it’s bound up with that whole individualism thing. For some it’s related to what I was just saying, a “if it can’t be done my way, I won’t be involved at all” way of looking at things. But for some it’s nothing more than the “pew potato syndrome,” the spiritual version of laziness that wants nothing more than to sit and be entertained. As I was at the door greeting people after midnight on Christmas Eve, I remember thinking, and even *saying* a couple of times, that it was a shame that I didn’t really *know* some of those that I met, whose names I vaguely know from our membership rosters. Now, mind you I am delighted that they at least come a few times a year. But what if one of them was the left arm of this part of the Body of Christ and we couldn’t carry the full load we have been given without them. What if one of them is meant to be the right leg of this Body of Christ and without them we have a hard time staying on course. What if one of them was the inner ear of the Body of Christ and without them we have a hard time keeping our balance.

Finally, perhaps the most important thing to remember is that *we* don’t make the Body of Christ. *God* does. We don’t provide the gifts which keep the Body of Christ alive and functioning and doing his work in the world. *He* does. We don’t define who or what belongs in the Body of Christ. *He* does. Like our bodies, the Body of Christ, the community of the faithful, is a mixed bag of the necessary, the nice, the occasionally good-looking, each of us essentially defined by our unique, one might say *peculiar* combination of components. And also like our bodies, as Paul so clearly tells us, we, in the Body of Christ, all need *all* of our parts, and are dependent upon one another for the fullness of our life. The God who made us, made *all* of us, knows *all* of us, forgives *all* of us, loves *all* of us, and binds *all* of us into his Body. We are to use *all* of the gifts of the Body of Christ to do *his* work in *his* world, not by our own strength, not with our own wisdom, not as isolated individuals, but side by side, each *part* of one another, together bound into his Body to manifest his love for all in our time and place.

Maybe somebody should tell the Anglican Primates.