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“Adding Up to One”
I Corinthians 12:12-31

Have you ever felt like you were a part of something bigger than yourself? Perhaps you have looked at the stars glimmering in the night sky and known that the universe is far more vast than you could ever imagine. Or maybe you served on a team – a sports team, a strategic planning team, a mission team – where the work you could do as a gathered group was far greater than anything you could do on your own. Or maybe you’re a musical type, and can recall how the sound of your own voice sounded weaving together in harmony with the voices of others – and how beauty of all of the unique voices singing together was so striking that it gave you chills.

In our scripture lesson for today, Paul points out to the church in Corinth that **they** are part of something bigger than their individual selves. They are, in fact, more than the sum of their individual parts. This diverse community – Jews and Gentiles, women and men, slave and free – from different backgrounds and different perspectives, with different gifts and different limitations – are miraculously one now in Christ.

To a church struggling to figure out how to be a church when the members are so different; to a church struggling to identify leaders with so many manifestations of a variety of gifts – Paul teaches about being a body. Each individual member – hands, feet, eyes and ears – is valuable to the health and the work of the one body. Not only is each member a part of the body – each part is necessary for the body to be its strongest. Paul makes a case that the unity of the whole is

dependent of the diversity of its parts: each unique, but working together for the common good.

Paul’s description of the church as the body of Christ is a word picture that we *get*. Regardless of the condition of our physical selves – of our personal strengths or personal challenges – we know how our breath and our heartbeat work together almost without notice to fuel every cell of our body with oxygen. Those of us who have tried to eat lunch while typing an email, drive across bridges through Pittsburgh rush hour traffic, or chew gum while patting our heads know the challenge and grace of our internal selves working together. And those of us who have broken a toe know how hard it is to walk with even the smallest injury to our foot, or how hard it is to make it through a school day or workday with a throbbing toothache.

Paul’s use of imagery is compelling, and perhaps we add our own metaphor to the conversation: the quarterback cannot say to the defensive lineman, “I have no need of you”; for then where would the team’s defense be? Or if the violin were to say to the timpani, because I am not a percussion instrument, I am not a part of the orchestra. That would not make it any less of an instrument – or any less essential for the playing of a symphony.

Yet as easy as it is to speak in metaphor about this call to unity in diversity, to the oneness of many, a striking feature of Paul’s text emerges. At a closer glance we see that Paul’s language is *not* metaphor at all. He does not say: The church is **LIKE** the body of Christ. The members are *like* a body, working together – a team or an orchestra whose greatest achievement occurs when all work together for the good of the whole.

No, Paul says the church IS the body of Christ. He speaks in definitive terms, in the language of certain reality. “Church,” he says, “*here is your identity. This is who you are. This is what you are. **You** are the body of Christ. You’re not a body of believers, not even a body of worshippers. You are not a team left to pick your own captain; you are not a community called to set your own rules. You are not individuals who will return home after services and forget where you were and go about your business. You are the body of **Christ** – united in Christ through the power of the Spirit; created with unique gifts yet a common call: to be Christ’s hands and feet, eyes and ears; to work together, to build each other up and to build up God’s kingdom.*”

As readers today, Paul challenges us with a beautiful image and a difficult call – to be ourselves, genuinely and in all our uniqueness – AND to be one, working together for a common good. Paul’s lesson challenges cultural messages of individual autonomy, of competition, of the survival of the fittest. Paul tells readers that our identity is layered: as uniquely gifted, collectively called, and united in the love of a Savior whose grace binds us together as one.

So what does it mean for **us** to be Christ’s body? What does it mean to be the Church – today?

We wrestle with precisely these questions in *our* day and time. All these years later, and with centuries upon centuries of teaching on this topic – all this practice behind us, the Church still struggles to define itself in and against the concerns of the world.

We ask:

- What does it mean to **be** the Body of Christ when there are different, even opposing, **faithful interpretations of the same Scriptures**?
- What does it mean to be the Body of Christ when the individual **members are diverse** in race and gender, sexual identity and ability, in life experiences and belief?
- What does it mean to be the Body of Christ when **denominations define us**, and schism divides us?
- What does it mean to be the body of Christ when engaged in **cultural political debate** around single-payer healthcare, gay marriage, and a war on terror?
- What does it mean to be the body of Christ in a world where **millions of Haitians have been displaced by an earthquake**; where heavy rains wreak havoc on our own nation’s west coast; and where the very ordinary struggles of our community involve the pains of job loss, homelessness, violence, addiction, hunger, and disease?

As Christians we are called to this Biblical reality that is so difficult to embody in our day to day lives. Even as we engage in the practice of trying to **be** the body of Christ, we sometimes find ourselves trying to answer for the body – when our actions seem to point away from God’s love, when the body of Christ isn’t how we would hope, and when certainly not how God had intended. As Pat Roberts makes public

claims that Haitians brought this destruction upon themselves; as high school history classes learn about the role of the church in the crusades, we groan and shake our heads and wonder how can WE be church together?

I spent much of my free time in college sitting on the floor of our campus center with young adults who had felt wounded by the Church for various reasons. One felt unwelcome because he was bisexual; another felt unwelcome because he was African American and both knew that Scripture had been used as a tool to fuel hatred against them and others like them. Another felt unwelcome because as a woman she was not fully included in the leadership of her church. Another was searching for truth and felt unwelcome because she didn't have all the answers. Another felt unwelcome because she had been raped as a teen, and felt abandoned and judged in her suffering. Another felt unwelcome because he wore torn jeans, struggled with drug and alcohol addiction and felt that there was no room in the church for one as imperfect as him. The list went on...

I sought to explain that by God's grace there was room in the Church for all of us. I sought to explain that the church itself is imperfect – full of broken people trying to do our best – but that the Church is made good, is made whole, in Christ. I tried to explain that the Church is founded and grounded on a paradigm of radical love – and that while we falter to express that love, God in Christ loves us perfectly and calls us to share that love with others.

But it is hard to give voice to this truth, and hard to put this truth into action. I even ask myself how I can better embody that truth which I so freely possess, how I can live into the love that has claimed me and is extended to others. It is

hard to figure out our place in the story – to ask how we can show God's love not only to those who are easy to like, but to all who are marginalized and ostracized by the world or the Church; to all who are tough to love, or with whom we disagree; to welcome into the Church those with whom we wouldn't want to sit down and share a meal.

Paul calls for a paradigm shift – for the church to remember who we are and whose we are – and to live into the reality of God's love with us. What's more, Paul issues a challenge to us, whether we feel like we are on the inside or on the outside of such circles. For Paul's words today remind us that we *need* each other. We even need those we don't like or don't understand. With Christ's help, we are at our best when we are **together**; we are strongest when we are one.

In a day when the Church often solves its problems by dividing, Paul's writing challenges us. Paul challenges us to stay connected, to maintain unity. Yet it is possible that even as he appeals to our sense of free will and our ability to choose, he is encouraging us to not kid ourselves – for he reminds us that there is nothing we can do to escape our connection to one another, **for it is Christ who holds us together**.

It is a daunting call, I know. But the good news of this story is also that Christ is with us. We don't need to walk this road alone, to do the impossible work of loving our enemies and working with those who hate us. Christ is the one who calls us together, who unites us in love, and who sends us out in service. Praise be to God!