

The Living Body

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

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1 Corinthians 12:12-31 (NRSV)

12 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. 13 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.

14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. 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? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 21 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.' 22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 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; 24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

The church, every last one of us together, is the living body of Christ in the world, claims the apostle Paul to the Corinthians, one body with many different members, each appointed to exercise gifts for the ultimate purpose of self giving love.

We are united. We affirm this claim this and every Sunday we gather together in worship, acknowledging that we are one people called by God to a common faith in Jesus.

We are also different, says Paul, and our differences are instruments of the Holy Spirit. The body consists of many parts serving many different functions for the good of the whole. Each of us contributes unique gifts, unique personalities, unique functionalities to our community life together, some of us teachers, some singers, some players, some gentle spirits, some truth tellers, some story tellers, some organizers, some information gatherers, some marketers. Without any of these gifts we wouldn't be able to be who we are, without any of you we wouldn't be able to be who we are.

Bishop Will Willimon tells a story from a church he served, about a woman who wanted to sing in the choir. She tried that. She was eventually asked to consider what other gifts she might serve the Lord with. Singing was not her strength. Then she tried to manage the Sunday school program. That was a disaster. Organization was not her strength. Then at a meeting one night, when someone was lamenting the sorry state of the church lawn, she spoke up and said, "I can do that!" She had a gift for landscaping. That began a tradition in that congregation of "Saturdays with Edna," and the church grounds were transformed.¹ Everyone has gifts for ministry, we just have to discover and share them with the community!

¹ Bishop Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Jan – Mar 2010, 1 Corinthians 12.

We are about to celebrate ritually an important moment in the life of this church, when we will ordain and install the newly elected deacons and elders of the church. These people, the church has decided, have particular gifts for caring for others and leading others that lend themselves to church office. While we set these folks apart for particular service to the church, we also remember and proclaim with Paul's help today that every member is baptized into the body, and serves an important function in our community's life. We need everyone, because we have quite a call and responsibility in functioning as the living body of Christ.

For Christian community lives like Jesus himself did, making indispensable the members of the body that seem to be weaker, clothing with honor those we might think are less honorable, treating with respect those who might be less respected in the rest of life. We are created and called as a community to have the same care for one another, to suffer with each other, to honor each other, to rejoice together. We can only begin to be a community resembling Christ when we welcome everyone, when we honor everyone, when we act like everyone matters to our life, like every gift among us is given by God for the good of all of us.

Last night Amanda and I attended a dance performance, no, we attended a divine revelation through the arts last night. The show was called "of moon water" by the Cloud Gate Dance Theater of Taiwan.² The whole thing was transport to a new and different place, a place where bodies move differently, where the walls of mirrors and the floor of waters and the dancers themselves are reflections of a beauty that makes you desperate to know where it comes from. These movers, and mind you it takes a lot to impress the Lower Family with movement, were not merely living bodies, they were personifications of beauty and grace. I thought I'd be telling you this morning about how the detached metaphor of a dance performance you probably didn't see was revealing about the beauty of the living body of Christ-like community. Amanda was sitting near a young boy who appeared to live with Terets Syndrome, which causes unfiltered and uncontrolled responses. And what this boy's gift was to the performance was voicing the seizure of breath, the exhilaration, the pure abandon that such beauty made real. Not all of us could have provided that gift, we might have been asked to leave, but not this child, he was appointed on this holy night as the chief authentic witness to beauty.

Yes, community rightly lived, even if its spontaneously created in an audience, is unified and diverse, but it is also how the risen Christ lives in the world, as Christian community rightly lived, unified by Jesus and diversified by the gifts of God. It is not just a body that functions, with eyes and ears and hands working together, but when it works like Christ, it is a body that is beautiful, it is the living revelation of the self-giving and loving God on earth.

So Paul would have us ask ourselves today, it seems, are you and I willing to see the giftedness in everyone? Are we willing to claim as indispensable those who appear weaker, are we willing to clothe in honor those we might think are less honorable, to respect those who might be less respected among us? The spirit works this way, through a community who honors the unsuspecting giftedness of all. There's something mysterious, magical in the discovery that our potential to love and serve is far greater than it seems.

One night after getting home from work, I was unwinding with the kids, going rapidly back and forth between playing games and reading a news magazine we had laying around. In the instants lifting my head up and back down again, I was traveling great distances, between the innocent fun and sweetness of playful games and some of the heartbreaking images coming back from Haiti. Eventually the rapid travel back and forth grew wearying, and I put down the magazine, went to check on supper, and returned to focus on a good game of dress up. Anna Jean, my beautiful little girl almost 2, tends to notice these days when I won't let her do something, like look at the magazine I had been reading, so she went and found it. She pulled out this news magazine and on the front it had a picture of a crying baby Haitian girl. "Sa By," she said. Trying to

² http://www.cloudgate.org.tw/eng/english/pop/moon_water.htm

reflect what I heard back to her, I said, "Oh, you saw a baby?" She did not affirm my interpretation, and said again, "Sa bee, bee sa, bee sa." Then I thought I heard her rightly, and reflected something else, "The baby is sad?" She nodded her head and said, "yah. Bee sa." I looked at the picture again, and saw the sadness for the first time, not a detached image of a tragedy, but a girl who had a name, who was feeling very sad. I was trying to get my arms around being taught by Anna Jean to see what is happening, and to be moved by it to do something, but was admittedly dazed and slowed by the moment. And then Anna Jean walked over to the couch and grabbed her baby doll, and said, "OK bee," "It's OK, baby, that's right." I knew that Anna Jean was both directing me in my responsibility to reassure her, but also directing me in my responsibility to reach out to those in the world who are suffering, hold their hands with my prayers, and acknowledge that when they suffer, I suffer. It was another moment in which the family's newest and most unsuspecting rabbi offered gospel tutelage to the mere church pastor, and a reminder that we are all called and gifted to be ministers of God's love.

We are all gifted and called to be ministers of Christ's gospel of love, and thanks be to God for the revelation.