

1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-31

ONE BODY OF CHRIST

There's a medical illustration, it's up on the screen, it comes in pictures and models of various sorts. It's called Homunculus Man. This exaggerated human figure illustrates the proportions of the brain devoted to the sense of touch in each part of the body. The hands are huge. The head is huge, and the tongue and lips are even bigger. A picture such as this could be drawn of the church in Corinth. In that church there were divisions and factions trying to redesign the body of Christ. Each group or person in that church were thinking that they were better than the other person, and thus deserving a larger representation like the large hands and lips of Homunculus Man.

If we go back to the beginning of this letter to the Corinthians we start with a church that's divided. Listen to how Paul starts his letter:

"It has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (1 Corinthians 1:11-13).

I've seen similar things in each parish that I've served. Churches today are no different than the church Paul was writing to. In place of Paul, Apollos and Peter you could substitute Derek Mathers, Ted Radke, and Gerald Luck, and hopefully you haven't found a substitute for Christ.

With such a divided church that Paul was writing to some might think he would urge them towards unity by promoting uniformity, but he doesn't. He highlights their diversity. Just think of Homunculus Man. Just because there is more physical sensation in the hands and lips than in the core of your body, that doesn't make the core less important. You need your core for all of those organs that are in there, but you might not want to always feel what's going on in your heart, lungs and stomach.

Paul is saying that diversity is important in the body of Christ. In diversity there can be uniformity. We're all working towards the same goal of faith and salvation in Christ, but we can do it in different ways, and have different roles within that work. We need to keep stressing this because as a Christian Church we've become fragmented. We have different denominations, some of which don't even attend the town ministerial, there are different Lutheran denominations, and we have differences among ourselves in our church – differences between pastor and people, and differences among the people with some pulling strongly in different directions wanting to get things done in their own way. In the end all that does is pull a church apart.

You can look at any issue that you want and you'll find differences. Should Christian parents send their children to Christian Schools, homeschool them, or send them to public schools? Should we baptize by sprinkling, pouring, or immersing? Is once enough, or do we have to apply the water three times in the name of the Trinity. These things and so many others divide us as churches. You don't like the way someone sings in church, or the way the church spends the money you donate, and so you stop coming, or you continue to argue in hopes that the other person will leave.

In our society we've gotten to the point where I'm right and you're wrong if you don't agree with me, and there's no middle ground for discussion. This culture has infected the church, and now it's not only that we want people to express their faith in the same way as us, but we think that they should think the same as us about all sorts of other worldly issues.

We're kidding ourselves if we think that we're not going to be affected by all sorts of issues from outside of the church, such as issues from dealing with our neighbours to responding to news stories that confront us each day locally or internationally. The question then is 'How are we going to live out our Christian life in regards to that issue', whether it's in discussing it among ourselves in the church, or addressing it in public.

How your Christian life is going to be led inside and outside of the church is going to depend upon the situation that you're in. Yet, before you address that situation know that God knew what He was doing when He designed this body, this church. As Paul said, "God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as He chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be?" (1 Corinthians 12:18-19).

If the council were just made up of trustees, who would handle the finances? If the church was full of skilled janitors, I'd no longer see spider webs all over the place, but then who would play the piano or sing. If everyone wanted to run Grace Café, we might get a bit overweight with all the baked goods brought to church on Sunday, and the frustration of too many cooks in the kitchen might drive all from the kitchen. On the other hand, if only one hand wants to work, that hand might get tired of doing all the work by itself.

Every member of the body needs every other member of the body. That's how bodies are made, even though not every member is seen doing its job. You likely wouldn't want to watch the intestines work, but each day you're glad they do their job.

God knew what He was doing when He designed this Church body. If the hand never reaches for the food from the café, then the intestines will never have any work to do, and the rest of the body will fail.

A wholesome view of the body is heard in the words of the Psalmist. “You formed my inward parts; You knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:13-16). The Psalmist is talking about the human body and life, and Paul is using the human body and life to help us to understand how the body of the church is supposed to be working together.

Paul tells us that even though we're many and variously different people we were all baptized into one body, by one Spirit. Our unity is found in this One Spirit whom God has given to us in our baptisms, and this One Lord to whom we now cling to and trust in. So, Paul begins this letter by encouraging the Corinthians to break through their divisions by pointing them to what they held in common: “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9).

This all brings to mind something else that Paul wrote to a different church in Ephesus, because all churches need to hear this. He wrote, “With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bear with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call — one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift” (Ephesians 4:2-7).

We each have different gifts. That's what Paul goes onto highlight in this letter to the Corinthians. Each of those gifts are important to the body of Christ. The differences among us are not to be fought over, because when we do, we not only hurt the other person, we hurt the whole body, just as if you were to stub your toe. Your whole body would be affected by how you now walked awkwardly to compensate for the pain in your toe.

Instead of fighting and hurting one another we're to be concerned about and care for one another. We learn this from Jesus. When God saw our painful situation He sent His Son to make us a part of His body. When our text says that “God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as He chose” (v. 18), He made Jesus the head of our body, the church, and He chose you to be where you are.

Paul told the Colossian church, that God's beloved Son brought us redemption and the forgiveness of sins, saying, Jesus “is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.” Through Jesus God reconciled “to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of Jesus' cross” (1:13-20). As our head, Jesus rose from the dead, after His crucifixion, so that He might bring us forgiveness and eternal life. This body of the church that you're joined to is joined to the Head – Jesus Christ. May that head guide your thoughts and actions. Amen.