

One Body

In the name of him whose one body we are, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Last week in worship we heard again about Jesus' first miracle at the wedding of Cana, and how there he both revealed the glory of his divine majesty and blessed the newlyweds and their guests with a generous gift of water turned to a large quantity of high quality wine. Something I didn't bring up then, however, was that his presence at a wedding and his using it as the occasion to begin to show the world who he is really is and what he's come to do also reminds us that Jesus is often referred to in the Scripture as "the Bridegroom of the Church". This is more than a mere figure of speech or parable-like illustration. Just as a couple entering into marriage become one flesh with each other, so it is also with Christ and those who come to faith in him. He gives his very body, blood, and Spirit over to the faithful, and we in turn give our bodies to him – we set ourselves aside for his purposes and not for our own. And thus we become one flesh with him.

In today's Epistle lesson, St. Paul is taking this line of thinking to the next level. Writing to the fractured and contentious church at Corinth, where the members were virtually at war with one another, Paul is reminding them that having come to faith in Jesus, they are united with Christ as his bride. They are one flesh with him; and not just independently. It's not like Christ is a polygamist with hundreds of different wives. That would be the Mormon version of Jesus, one Paul would have emphatically denied. No, there is only one holy, Christian, and apostolic Church; only one bride of Christ. It consists of all those who know the Lord Jesus and trust him as their Savior from sin. They receive the gift of his body and blood given for their lives and the forgiveness of their sins, and they in turn worship him with their bodies as their crucified, risen, and glorified King. And being one flesh with Christ, they are also one flesh with each another.

"For in one Spirit we were baptized into one body", Paul tells us. It doesn't make any difference who you are or where you came from; Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, young or old – every one of us had the same rebirth in holy Baptism. And every one of us believes in Jesus by virtue of the work of the same Holy Spirit – the same Spirit we drink in whenever and as often as the Word of God is proclaimed among us. We are the body of Christ, and each one of us is a member of him. And this is the way we should think of ourselves: as the various parts and members of one body, each of us performing the roles we've been given for the health and wellbeing of the whole.

From this basic concept, Paul draws a number of lessons. First, that no one is independent. Paul utterly destroys the myth of the lone Christian when he says, "If the foot should 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." Within the deeply divided Corinthian congregation, there were various factions all striving for supremacy and control over the others. They were constantly showing off their spiritual gifts to "out-Christian" one another and prove that they were better or more spiritual. And it seems that when some didn't get their way, or when they were given roles they perceived as being less glamorous than others, they went off in a snit, essentially taking their marbles and going home. "If I can't have it my way or if I can't do the job I think I'm best suited for, well then forget it. I'm out of here." Such an attitude is simply unchristian. It denies the organic unity we have as the one body of Christ. And whenever we find ourselves thinking this way, we ought to recognize it for the wretched sin that it is and repent of it.

Paul goes on to show that in our one body we need a wide variety of parts each performing their own individual functions. “If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell?” The idea is that if we’re all trying to do the same job within the church, then any number of other vitally necessary tasks won’t be accomplished. It’s the Lord who builds his church. He’s brought us together as his body in this congregation. And he’s assembled this group with the right mix of talents and gifts and strengths and skills to accomplish what he wants done here. Therefore each of us is to use those talents and gifts that God has given in whatever roles we are assigned for the good of the whole body.

And then Paul really gets into the meat of this lesson: there is no member of Christ’s body whom we don’t need. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I don’t need you’.” It’s pretty obvious: an eye would be in a world of hurt if it didn’t have a hand to wipe away foreign objects; and a head without feet would be unable to move. So it is also with us – even when it’s not obvious what a particular member’s function is supposed to be. Remember it’s the Lord who put us together. And he is a lot wiser than we are.

In the last few decades, researchers have mapped the immensely complicated human genome – that blueprint for the living body contained in each one of our cells. It’s an enormous amount of information. If it were written down on paper 500 words per page, it would take 600,000 pages to record it all. Of course, they were doing more than recording it; they were also learning what the genetic information actually did: which genes controlled growth, and the development of various organs, and hair and eye color, and what not. As it turns out, that sort of information is contained in a relatively small part of the whole genetic code. The original researchers couldn’t figure out what something like 90% or more of our DNA did. And as a result, it became widely known as “junk DNA”. It was dismissed as vast quantities of genetic information that did nothing and that we really didn’t need. They chalked it up to blind alleys of human evolution still floating around in the system – like an attic full of stuff that once served a purpose but that is no longer needed. But that’s since changed. Current research is showing that most of that so-called junk DNA is actually an incredibly complex timing system. It doesn’t so much direct *what* is to be done as it does *when* in the process it’s supposed to happen. Now they’re saying that the amount of junk DNA we have may be as low as 5 to 10 percent. And best guess is that the remainder does something important too. It’s just that they haven’t figured it out yet.

Returning to my point, if the Lord who so fearfully and wonderfully made our bodies with such a complex genetic code that we’re only now beginning to understand, don’t you suppose he’d take at least the same care and concern when assembling the body of Christ? Just as there is no junk DNA, there are no junk Christians. The Lord has a plan and purpose for each of us that in some way serves the greater good of the whole body. And so there’s no place in the church for a thought like, “You know, we could get along just fine and maybe even better without this or that person.” We can’t.

In fact, Paul makes a point of lifting up those members who are judged by others to be pathetic or ignoble. “The parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty.” I had an illustration that I was going to use here; but then I thought better of it. It might not go over very well. Suffice it to say that what Paul is referring to here are those parts of our bodies that we normally keep clothed and that perform such tasks as reproduction and the removal of wastes. They’re vital tasks. They absolutely need to be done; but we don’t normally discuss them in polite company. No. And when you see that high school kid who for some unfathomable reason thinks it’s fashionable to

wear the top of his pants around his knees, or the young lady with a hemline that's short enough to be called "cheeky", you want to say, "Show a little less skin and some more modesty, thank you. I don't want to see that. Please, keep it covered."

In the same way, we are to cover each other – cover each other with love and forgiveness, kindness and understanding, patience and peace – and especially those members who are in one way or another struggling the most and that we in our sinful natures tend to look down on. Those who are disabled physically or challenged mentally, those who are plagued with an addiction, those whose attendance or giving record is less than stellar – who don't seem to be pulling their weight, those whose faith is shaky or underdeveloped, those who are in financial trouble, the grieving, the sick, the lonely, the brokenhearted ... they don't need our judgment. They don't need our condemnation or cold shoulders. They need our help and encouragement. They need our care and concern. And we need to recognize and embrace them as members of the one body of which we are a part.

This is what Paul means when he says, "If one member of the body suffers, all suffer together." When you stub your toe, your hands reach down immediately to embrace it, and then you hop around in a circle hollering at the top of your lungs. It's a total body experience. That's how the church ought to be toward a member who is suffering in any way. We all join in the relief effort.

Likewise, Paul says we share in each other's successes and triumphs. "If one member is honored, all rejoice together." The crown of life is worn on the head; but the whole body enjoys the benefits of Christ's redemptive work. In the same way, when one member of the church is honored or gifted in any way, we all benefit, and we rejoice in what the Lord has done for them.

And of course, what I have been describing here today is the goal. It's the way things ought to be in the church, which is the one body of Christ. I'm sure we all see a vast yawning chasm between the way things are and the way they ought to be. But to reach the goal, we have to know what it is and what it looks like. And then we can identify the problem. It's not Christ's fault that we fall short of the mark. He has done and continues to do all that is necessary for us. He gave for us his very life on the cross. He united us with him in his death and resurrection in Holy Baptism, by which he also forgave our sins and gave us his Holy Spirit. And he continues to give us his Word, his Spirit, his blood, and his body to make us the one body of Christ. What stands in the way of us actually acting as his body should is our continuing sin. It's our selfishness, our pride, and our lack of love for the other members of his body. From all such sins, we need to repent. We need to repent whenever and as often as they arise within our dark hearts. And receiving again the Word of Christ's infinite forgiveness, and empowered by his Spirit who enables us to do supernatural things, with faith and hope in the promises of God, we can at very least make progress toward the goal. May Christ in his mercy grant it to us, his one body. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!