

3 Epiphany  
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a  
January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
The Rev. John Forman

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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. 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.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would 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. And if the ear would 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. 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? But as it is, 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? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 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. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts.

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The word of YHWH in Nehemiah and in Luke, opened before gatherings of God's people, reappears in Paul's reinvigorating letter to the church in Corinth. Using a physical image, Paul reminds his readers that the Holy Spirit offers awe-inspiring grace to all of God's children. His letter reassures us all that, in the body of the church, each one of us is integrally necessary. No one is extra. No one is redundant. We each have a place, an offering and a reason to belong here.

Paul wrote this letter from Ephesus in about the year 54 to the church that he founded just a few years earlier in one of the largest and most important city-states in ancient Greece. Between Paul's time living in Corinth and this letter, there have been significant events in the life of the church and a lively exchange of communication. The young church is struggling to take in and adapt Paul's teachings about Christ in a culture rooted in Greek history, mythology and philosophy.

In this part of his letter, Paul is responding to their questions about spiritual gifts or "charisms." A charism is a manifestation of God's grace in a person or community expressed through service or ministry. Another way to

say it is that God draws people into service or ministry within a community of God's people and then provides the ability to fulfill that ministry.

Last week, we heard part of the letter just before this reading where Paul declared that every one of God's children has her or his own charism. In the ancient world, some of the more common charisms involved the ability to impart wisdom or knowledge, or a trust in God that inspired others or an ability to discern the movement of the Spirit in others. Some could speak in various languages and others could interpret. Some had the courage to speak the truth and others could facilitate healing.

Paul insists that no one of these charisms is superior to another and all are valuable. All genuine gifts of grace are to be used *for* and *with* others. None of them are given to improve one's social standing or as evidence of personal prestige.

The church in Corinth had trouble putting this teaching into practice. The church today has similar difficulties. We argue with our brothers and sisters over what happens in the Eucharist. We are divided over the relative merits of liturgy or personal Bible study. We disagree about what it means to say that the Holy Spirit "proceeds" from the Father and the Son.

Paul's point then is the same as it is now: the variety of charisms that God grants are not just for the sake of variety. The diversity of charisms that God grants is there to acknowledge the unity of God. The only way to calm "charism envy" or to dislodge entrenched certainties is the reminder that there are countless manifestations and expressions of God's grace.

There is also no need to *deny* the charisms of grace that nourish us! These are the best ways to learn how to truly trust God to do what God does in people's lives. And if we can relax about that reality and not insist that everyone follow God's yearning in the same way that we do, our eyes may open enough to see that what works for others may well be the Spirit working through another part of the Body of Christ.

Paul's letter speaks to the church in Corinth as and where they are – both theologically and literally. Having lived in Corinth for 18 months, Paul knows about a shrine there; a shrine dedicated to Asclepius, a prominent demi-god revered by the Greeks for his healing power. They considered him to be so skillful that he could raise the dead. We still use his symbol – a snake entwined on a rod – as a symbol for modern medicine and health care.

Pilgrims and patients flocked to the temples of Asclepius. They were a lot like modern health spas, complete with dormitories, saunas, baths, fountains and dining rooms with indoor grills. Excavations of the ancient site at Corinth have unearthed an impressive number of terra cotta body parts: arms and legs, eyes and ears, breasts and genitals and so on. People left these as a memento in the shape of whatever was healed, and inscribed them with the

ailment, the remedy that the demi-god recommended in a dream, and the result.

Paul uses this vivid cultural image to clarify his point about the relation of the followers of Christ to each other and to God. For Paul, love is the greatest charism and the foundation of all Christian life. He is also persuaded that the church should be characterized, above all, by unity – not *uniformity*, but *solidarity*, a unity of diversity

And so, dismembered terra cotta limbs are everything that a church should *not* be: dead, divided, unloving and unloved. By contrast, Paul offers an image of a loving, living and whole body. This is the image of a collective in which each individual member's unique identity, talents and background are integrated into a shared life.

The image is more than a compelling, poetic metaphor. The church, for Paul, *is* the Body of Christ; not Jesus, but Christ, the Messiah. And it is a *holy* body because it is filled with the Holy Spirit. God has granted each member of the church abilities, insights and experiences that are there to contribute cooperatively and mutually to the well-being of the whole body. Rather than sliding into rivalries over gifts, Paul makes the case that, if we will include our sister's or our brother's gifts, then no church lacks in gifts.

While each is unique and indispensable, Paul's letter emphasizes those charisms and actions that promote community like discipleship, truth-telling and teaching over those more exotic (and in Corinth at the time, more esteemed) gifts that primarily highlight the individual, like speaking in tongues.

"It is a joyful word," says Rev. Dr. Melinda Quivik, "for those who are weak, less respected than others and least honored to hear that the body needs each member, and that we need especially those who are without power. This is also a word of hope for those who are strong, honored and respected. Even the mighty encounter their own weaknesses, disrespect, loss and self-doubt. No one is immune. Anyone can be brought low and falter at any time, so all of us need to hear that we are vital to the body."

Now, I think that the people of this parish act like we understand this rather gracefully most of the time. Still, everyone needs a reminder from time to time. So. Let me leave you with a few lines from a book written for children called "You Belong to Me." And I invite you to hear it as God's children; to listen as if God were reading these words to you.

"The stars belong in the deep night sky and the moon belongs there too,  
and the winds belong in each place they blow by and I belong with  
you...

And you belong where you love to be, and after each day is through,  
you will always belong right next to me and I'll belong next to you...

The crickets belong in the old stone wall and the bees belong in the clover, just as winter belongs in the place after fall, before the new year starts over.

And you are a dream that the world once dreamt and now you are part of its song. That's why you are here, in the place where you're meant, for this is right where you belong..."

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