

## ONE BODY, MANY PARTS

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1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

The ancient Christian church in Corinth was a church that all Christians should love. We should love it not because it was a perfect example of the body of Christ in this world, but because it was so magnificently imperfect. If you are ever feeling down about your own church, if you are despondent about the way that people in the church are getting along (or not getting along), if you disagree with the preacher's sermons, then you only need read about the church in Corinth and your spirits will be lifted. In fact, they will soar.

It is like whenever I am feeling out of sorts with my family, I can just turn on the TV and switch channels until I locate some family-based reality show. I can watch for a few minutes and I realize that, hey, my family has nothing on those people.

Or, if I begin to feel that my house is getting cluttered, then I only need watch a few minutes of a show about hoarders and suddenly my place looks like the epitome of Scandinavian minimalism.

Furthermore, when we read about all the troubles at Corinth, we are reminded that, just as deeply as we love our own families, it is obvious that Paul loved this particular church family.

The Apostle Paul, following his conversion to Christ, spent the last part of his life founding worshiping communities throughout the Mediterranean world.

We read in the Book of Acts (Chapter 18) that after spending time in Athens, Paul traveled south to Corinth where he became acquainted with Aquila and Pricilla, a Jewish couple who had been expelled from Rome. Paul remained with them in Corinth for eighteen months. At first, he would spend each Sabbath in the synagogue teaching the people about Jesus. However, the Jews soon banned him from the synagogue and so he turned his ministry to the Gentiles in Corinth. The church that he assembled was comprised of Jews and non-Jews alike.

After establishing the church and moving on the next mission field, Paul continued to keep in touch with the folk in Corinth. He learned of the church's growing pangs as the people sought to interweave their new faith with their old lives. There were, understandably, various hurdles and conflicts among the people—how to worship, what to eat, how to treat one another, and more. One of the biggest issues was the sharp rift between the wealthy members of the congregation who viewed themselves as superior to the poor in the congregation. Paul addresses these issues in the two letters to Corinth that we have today.

Paul could easily have written off this dysfunctional church as a lost cause. He could have explained, “In my missionary career, I planted a number of churches. But not every church works out.” But he does not say this. He remains in touch with the church. He pours his heart into the letters that he sends them.

In Chapter 12, Paul offers his argument on why the people should settle their differences. He explains to the congregation that despite their festering conflicts, that in the name of Jesus, they are part of one body, the body of Christ, drawn together by the power of the Holy Spirit. No matter who you are or where you come from—Jew or Greek, slave or free—all are one in the Spirit.

To illustrate this image, Paul talks about our own bodies. The body, he says, is made of up many parts. We are not all just a foot, or a hand, or an eye. We are all of these, and more. If one of these things is lost, then its function is lost as well. Without a nose, there is no sense of smell. Without ears, there is no ability to hear. Each part is important and has a purpose. God arranged the body so that each member is to be valued equally.

Paul is telling the people in this fractious church that each of them together are part of God’s perfect plan. Each has a place, a calling. Each, individually, are part of a greater body. *If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.* That is how it should be.

Paul is calling the people to overcome their differences and live in unity. Yes, you are each unique, but you are also part of a greater body. Not one of you is superior to another. Not one of you can be dismissed or rejected. The Spirit calls us to worship in unity.

It is not difficult to understand what Paul is communicating to this church. We are familiar with the language. We know how different people have different gifts. We celebrate this in our own congregation. Some are officers, some are teachers, some are good at finances, some are good at fixing things, some make scrumptious desserts. God calls each of us to different tasks. It is this very diversity that makes us stronger.

Up to this point, this is a decidedly Christian sermon about how Christians should treat one another inside the walls of the church. Yes, we should treat one another as equals. Yes, those with power should not lord that power over the weaker members to get their way. We should respect the gifts of each person and value them. In this way of living we can envision a type of Christian utopia, a perfect community in which we may live.

However, if we limit this vision to just the church then we are not following Paul’s intent. Paul meant for the Christians in Corinth to take this mode of life beyond the walls of their community and out into the world. The language he used

about the parts of the body working together were actually counter-cultural to the ways of thinking in the Roman world. Writers of his day promoted the idea that in each system there were those who were naturally gifted to be heads, or leaders. They were the ones who should lead and everyone else should respect and follow them. It was argued that this was the natural order of things. Some parts are superior and some are inferior. Each has its place.

What Paul writes to Corinth is counter to this Roman understanding. God does not view any person as better or more valued than the rest.

Paul concludes Chapter 12 with a series of questions. Paul asks, *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?* The answer to each of these is, of course, no. Not everyone is an apostle or a teacher. And we wouldn't want them to be. We are better when different people are able to use their different gifts.

Then, the very last statement Paul makes in this chapter is this, *But strive for the greater gifts*. That is just a bit odd, isn't it. If we all have God-given gifts, and if they are all equally important, then how do we strive for something greater? What could be greater? The answer is love. That is the greatest gift. It is a gift of the Spirit. It is a gift of God. In the following chapter—Chapter 13—Paul calls all Christians to *strive for the greater gifts*. These greater gifts are simply love—not the romantic love between two people, but a greater love, the love of God. Romantic love is wonderful, but a greater love is the love we have for our neighbors, God's love expressed through acts of compassion, through *works of love*. This love is not envious or boastful. This love is patient and kind. It does not try and get its own way. It rejoices in the truth.

Before I end, I want to talk about another preacher who issued a plea for unity. The preacher is the Right Rev. Miriann Budde, a bishop in the Episcopal church. She preached on Tuesday in the National Cathedral in Washington in an inaugural prayer service. Her sermon focused on the need for unity in our nation, the kind of unity she says, “fosters community across diversity and division, a unity that serves the common good.” Although she didn't quote Paul, I thought that her words echoed exactly Paul's words to the Corinthian church.

Unity, she said, “is a way of being with one another that encompasses and respects differences, that teaches us to hold multiple perspectives and life experiences as valid and worthy of respect; that enables us, in our communities and in the halls of power, to genuinely care for one another even when we disagree.”

The bishop's words are clear and powerful. And we probably would not know of them except that sitting on the front pew in the church was the newly inaugurated President of the United States.

And at the close of her sermon, she addressed him directly, asking him to seek unity and have mercy on all people in this land, all those who live here and work here, including those Paul would call the "weaker" parts of the body, the vulnerable, those who the bishop says, "pick our crops and clean our office buildings, who wash the dishes after we eat in restaurants and work the night shift in hospitals, those who may not be citizens or have the proper documentation."

She finishes by saying, "May God grant us all the strength and courage to honor the dignity of every human being, speak the truth in love, and walk humbly with one another and our God, for the good of all the people of this nation and the world."

This should be our prayer every day, that each person regardless of their wealth, race, gender, sexual orientation, place of birth, citizenship, or any other defining factor, is treated with mercy and dignity as Christ has taught us, that we may live in the unity of the Holy Spirit loving one another as Christ taught us to love, remembering that we all parts of one body, the body of Christ.