

ONE BODY, MANY PARTS

1 Corinthians 12:12-21; 26-27

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¹² Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

¹⁵ Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹ If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, but one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”

²⁶ If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Matthew 7:1-5; 7-12

⁷ “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ² For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

³ “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴ How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

⁷ “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

⁹ “Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? ¹¹ If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! ¹² So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

MESSAGE:

The church at Corinth was in deep trouble. The congregation was riven by divisiveness, factions and backbiting. Rancor between members had reached the point where some members of the congregation were filing lawsuits against others. Those who spoke in tongues were lording it over those who couldn't—or wouldn't. Members who observed Jewish food laws were furious with other members who claimed that their freedom in Christ exempted them from such obligations. Unmarried members were critical of those who married. One party attached itself to an elder by the name of Apollos and began to oppose another party which claimed Paul as its leader. There were confrontations over worship style, over who got to take communion first, and over whether or not to expel public sinners from the congregation. The members couldn't even agree about whether or not the endtimes had arrived. The congregation was in a state of turmoil.

The funny thing is—the Corinthians were zealous Christians. The problem was not that they were apathetic or indifferent to what was going on in their church. Quite the opposite: they cared so much about it that they were fighting each other tooth and nail over how to run it. Brotherly love had given way to a win/lose mentality and the congregation had divided into warring camps. Jesus had warned his disciples about this problem when he told them that a spirit of 'lording it' over one another was inappropriate among the people of God. *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be your slave."* (Matt. 20:25-26) Then he put it to them bluntly: *"You are still worldly," he wrote. "For since there is jealousy and quarreling among, are you not worldly?"*

Whether or not competition is a desirable thing in the kingdom of the world is a matter of opinion, but the Bible makes it clear that it has no place in the Kingdom of God.

The spirit of competitiveness, of win/lose/ has its roots in the sin of pride—the "mother sin" of all other sins. Pride was born in the Garden of Eden when Satan persuaded Adam and Eve that they could throw off God's authority and be equal to Him in knowledge. Atheism, which denies God's existence and agnosticism, which asserts that God's existence can be neither proved nor disproved are both attempts to overthrow God's authority and stem from pride. Neither position is intellectually defensible since God's nonexistence cannot be proven empirically or logically and his existence is easily inferred from the order of creation, which is why the Psalmist writes that, *"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" (Ps. 14:1)* But pride makes fools out of men even as it convinces them that they have much to be proud about. Some people admit that there is a God but then deny His relevance to their lives by depersonalizing Him and imagining Him as a vague, benign omnipresence. Others try to wish Him out of existence by saying, "If there were a God in heaven there wouldn't be all this suffering." Amazing how we can bring about untold misery with our sins and then blame it on God. All these arguments proceed along the same line: they dispense with God by declaring him a casualty of intellectual

progress (“We’ve outgrown such simplistic ways of thinking.”) That’s the form they take. But the motive behind them is always the same: if we do away with God, we can be autonomous, free agents who can do as we please without fear of being punished by a tyrannical deity. We can be masters of our own being.

This sentiment was expressed vividly in a poem written by William Henley entitled “*Invictus*.” Its last verse reads: “*It matters not how straight the gate, how charged with punishment the scroll, I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.*” Stirring words that appeal to the rebel in all of us. They also appealed to a man by the name of Timothy McVeigh who murdered 168 people and injured another 600 by detonating a truck bomb in front of the Federal office building in Oklahoma City. He loved those words so much that he wrote them down immediately before he was strapped onto a gurney and given a lethal injection. A dramatic example of a simple fact: pride leads to rebellion against God and rebellion against God leads to death.

In Greek mythology, this rebellion against God on the part of man is symbolized in the figure of Prometheus—a giant who stole fire from the gods, and when he refused to repent, was sentenced to eternal torment. Prometheus stands in a long line of heroic rebels in art and literature who refused to cower to anyone. Such heroic rebels are appealing figures—especially to Americans like us whose country was born in revolution and who have always tended to root for the underdog, the rebel. And in worldly or political terms, there is a place for rebellion. Thomas Jefferson justified the American Revolution by saying, “*The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots.*” But when it comes to man’s relationship with God, rebellion is driven by pride, and pride always goes before the fall.

Pride is a sin which can creep almost unnoticed into the thinking of a Christian. Since the Bible tells him that he is elect, chosen by God for eternal life from the beginning of time, he can come to think of himself as “preferred by God” over other people. His knowledge that he has been redeemed at such a great price, which should lead him to humble gratitude and repentance in dust and ashes, can lead instead to spiritual boasting—the kind the Pharisee indulged in when he prayed, “*I thank you God that I am not like other men...*” And when pride enters the heart of the Christian, it is not long before it shows up in the Christian congregation. That is what had happened at Corinth. People were even standing up in church and cursing Christ in order to give God the opportunity to bestow more grace upon them. “I like to sin, He likes to forgive—it’s a nice arrangement!” *This was one messed up congregation!*

To all this Paul responds by asserting the vital importance of unity in the church, which he calls the Body of Christ. “*The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.*” Paul is saying that since we are all born again in Christ, we are all part of the same Body. Given this spiritual truth, our diversity should be the occasion for celebration rather than jealousy and quarreling. He uses the analogy of the human body: “*...The body is not made up of one*

part but of many...If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be." In the same way, God has so arranged things in His church that individualism can flourish without impairing the unity of the congregation.

I'd like to offer another analogy for the church—a musical analogy. Jazz is a uniquely American form of music and the earliest form that jazz took was called "Dixieland." Dixieland was a kind of musical stew or "gumbo" which resulted from the melding together of other kinds of music: Gospel music from the churches, the blues from slaves who worked the cotton fields, ballads from music halls, marching band music from parade bands, and African rhythms brought to this country by slaves. Even though its parts were not new, Dixieland itself was altogether new. What was new and exciting about it was that it allowed individual instrumentalists the freedom to improvise solos within the constraints of fixed melodies, harmonies and rhythms. In other words, it allowed for individual diversity within overall unity—something which struck a deep chord in the American imagination and caught on like wildfire. All later forms of jazz and popular music in America derived from Dixieland and, to a certain extent, bore its stamp. Ragtime, swing bands, rhythm and blues, modern jazz, even rock and roll—all consisted of instrumental diversity within melodic and harmonic unity.

This same kind of diversity within unity exists within the human body and needs to exist within the church. Paul rhetorically comments: *"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!'"* Put another way, what sense would it make for the trumpet player to say to the drummer, "I don't need you."? Isn't it in the best interest of every member of the band to have each member sound as good as possible so that the entire band sounds great?

In this same way we can and should encourage and celebrate the uniqueness of each individual member of the church and rejoice in their gifts, knowing that their service to the church builds up the whole body! As individual Christians, we have nothing to resent or fear from each other for we know that God loves each one of us equally and abundantly! *"He loves each one of us," St. Augustine wrote, "as if there were only one of us to love."* Where is there room for envy or resentment? Each one of us is loved with an everlasting love with no need to "lord it" over anyone else because we are One Body! I would only add that this congregation has been richly blessed by God with such unity.

This morning we will partake of the most important resource we have for preserving and increasing our unity in the Body of Christ: the Lord's Supper. That is where we all go to eat the same spiritual food and drink the same spiritual drink. Each time we go to the Lord's table we empty ourselves of our sins and we are filled with Christ. And as Christ becomes part of us in body and blood, we become more like Him, and collectively we become more and more the Body of Christ to this community.

What an awesome privilege. Amen