

# “Life’s Basic Law”

a sermon by

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Text: “As it is, there are many members, yet one body” (I Corinthians 12:20).

“Let me tell you how we are going to die.” So writes David Brooks in The New York Times. “Twenty percent of us, according to a Rand Corporation study, are going to get cancer or another rapidly debilitating condition and we’ll be dead within a year of getting the disease. Another twenty percent of us are going to suffer from some cardiac or respiratory failure. We’ll suffer years of worsening symptoms, a few life-threatening episodes, and then eventually die.

But forty percent of us will suffer from some form of dementia (most frequently Alzheimer’s disease or a disabling stroke). Our gradual, unrelenting path toward death will take eight or ten or even twenty years, during which we will cease to become the person we were. We will linger on, in some new state, depending on the care of others.”

Over the past few years, Brooks points out, the President’s Council on Bioethics, chaired by Leon Kass, has tried to grapple with what this means for our society. Some of the issues are practical; namely, how do we take care of this aging population? But the biggest issues the Kass report deals with are moral and cultural. We live in an individualistic society. We think of ourselves as autonomous creatures, making up our own minds and seeking our own self-fulfillment. But as the Kass report notes, “The defining characteristic of our time seems to be that we are both younger longer and older longer.”

The report shows how far social thinking has moved in the past thirty years. A generation ago, all the emphasis was on rebelling against conformity and liberating the individual. Now the individual is less likely to be regarded as the fundamental unit of society. Instead, it is the family. In a mobile, high tech age, the Kass report is a declaration of dependence.

## I.

In a remarkable way and in a very different context that is precisely the point that the Apostle Paul makes to the church at Corinth. The problem in Corinth, as Richard Hayes points out in his Commentary on I Corinthians, is the divisiveness that has taken over an entire congregation. Some of the Corinthians have placed inordinate emphasis on showy displays of spirituality, especially the gift of speaking in tongues. Paul deals with this problem by speaking of the necessity of diversity and the interdependence of the members of the body.

The metaphor that Paul uses to describe the church is the image of the human body. Just as the body has many parts (eyes, ears, legs, arms, head, etc.), so the church has many parts. In every church there are people with differing gifts. Some sing in the choir, some teach in the church school, some engage in pastoral care or in ministries of outreach. Some serve as Elders or Deacons. No gift, argues the Apostle Paul, is greater than the other. The diversity of gifts is the gift of God to the church (verses 14-20). The interdependence of all these gifts is what holds the church together as one body (verses 21-26). Because in Corinth there were those of higher social status and wealth who lorded this over others, Paul encourages the more privileged members of the community to respect and value the contributions of those members who appear to be their inferiors, both in social status and spiritual potency. He concludes this section with a sobering and very true statement about of "Life's Basic Law." "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." This morning we are considering the fundamental nature of human community.

## I.

One of the most fundamental aspects of the nature of community is the intricate and intimate way that we are connected to one another. In a sermon preached to a group of students several years ago at Duke University, Tom Long made a point that bears consideration. He told these university students that the most difficult part of any examination was not in the student's part but in the teacher's part. The burden on the teacher is framing the question in just the right way so that he or she can elicit the right response. Long told of a geology professor in a university who was writing a question for his final exam in basic geology. The students had been studying certain minerals and geologic rock formations. The question on the exam was as follows: "Name three things that occur on the earth which do not occur on the moon." One of the students, recognizing the faulty nature of the question, answered as follows: "Roller skates, Bruce Springsteen, and the Republican Party."

The problem, you see, is that you cannot get the right answer unless you ask the right question. That is what is so compelling about the arguments that Paul makes both in I Corinthians

and in Romans and Galatians as well. The law of ministering to the lowliest and the least is there, because in a body where we are all members one of another, we must despise none and humbly serve the lowest. The law of finding life by losing it is there because in a body where it can never be well with any unless it is well with all, we must care about the whole.

Now there are some who think this is idealistic, but it is not, as the David Brooks article points out. We are dependent on one another. In fact, in order to understand Paul's analogy here one has to frame it in the context not only of I Corinthians 12, but also in fact through the whole section of I Corinthians 12-14. Most of us are familiar with I Corinthians 13. It is Paul's great chapter on love. But the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians is only the logical continuation of the twelfth, and the heart of the twelfth is this: we are one body--Note--not ought to be one body, not should be one body--but we are one body. And Paul says this because that is the basic fact of life; love is life's basic law.

That is why the reaction to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina has been as strong as it has. It isn't as if Hurricane Katrina was the only storm that hit the Gulf Coast. There have been other powerful storms. There was Carla in 1961, Camille, in 1969, and Andrew in 1992. But, Katrina was a massive blow not only to the Gulf Coast region, but to America's pride as well. David Brooks wrote that it was one of a long series of such devastating blows: "Over the past few years, we have seen intelligence failures in the inability to prevent September 11<sup>th</sup> and find Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq. We have seen incompetent postwar planning. We have seen the collapse of Enron and corruption scandals on Wall Street. We have seen scandals at some of our leading magazines and newspapers, steroids in baseball, and the horror of Abu Ghraib." We are a nation whose self-confidence has been shattered, and the only hope for us is to rid ourselves of the delusion of our innocence and independence and realize that we are all interdependent on each other.

### III.

There is also a social dimension to the declaration of human dependence to which Paul speaks in I Corinthians. We may think we can isolate ourselves from all the poverty, crime, and lowliness of life, but it is never far from us. Charles Dickens, the great novelist, understood this. When asked one day why a rich person should care about what happens in the slums, he answered by saying "There is not an atom of slime, not a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which these people live, not one obscenity or degradation about them, not an ignorance, not a wickedness, not a brutality, that shall not work its retribution through every order of society, up to the proudest of the proud, and to the highest of the high."

You see, Paul was right. We are all in this together and one of the most important questions each of us should ask ourselves is the question: "Is my life making a difference?" The question is not how much money did you make last year, but did your life really make a difference

When I was in Princeton several years ago, I went with several members of the group I was with to listen to Tony Campolo speak to a group of University students. Tony Campolo is an

evangelical activist who has served as professor of Sociology at Eastern College in Pennsylvania. He is one of the most outspoken and popular speakers on the campus circuit. In speaking to this group of University students he talked about the importance of making a difference. He spoke of one of his students, an African American student by the name of Bryan Stevenson, who had graduated from Eastern College at the top of his class and who had then gone to Harvard Law School. He was clerking for a federal judge, when one day he decided to do something different with his life. He moved to Montgomery, Alabama. Every morning this young attorney gets up and goes down to the jailhouse and defends poor people, especially those on death row. When Tony Campolo asked him about capital punishment, he said, "In this country they don't put criminals to death, they put poor people to death. Because there are two kinds of law: one for the rich and powerful--they get the lawyers that get them off. There's another kind of law for the poor and the oppressed, and the poor go down the tubes, Tony, because the poor have no one to speak for them." And then he smiled and said, "Except in Montgomery, Alabama, because in Montgomery, Alabama I speak for the poor. I speak for the poor, Tony."

#### IV.

Then, finally, these words in Paul's letter to the church at Corinth remind us of the importance of pastoral care in the life of the church. If David Brooks is correct, and we are going to be living increasingly in a world where interdependence is increasingly important, then the church has something to say here that is critically important. One of the images that the Reformer John Calvin used to describe the church was the image of "the mother of the faithful." Calvin viewed himself primarily as a pastor. He was a theologian in order to be a pastor and not a pastor in order to be a theologian. In speaking of the church as "the mother of the faithful," he said, "I shall start, then with the church, into whose bosom God is pleased to gather his sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach the goal of faith."

Thomas Friedman is right. The world is flat. But it is not flat only in terms of a global economy. It is flat in the sense that we are all related to one another. And when we discover that, we will finally discover the only real way to real joy and real peace.

Amen!