



"One in Christ"

a sermon by

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1st Corinthians 12:12-31a

This week we will turn to the pages of Paul's letter to the Corinthians- chapter 12, verses 12-31a. Paul has just spoken to the congregation of the variety of spiritual gifts that are distributed among them by the Holy Spirit- such as gifts of prophesy, or healing. He now turns his attention to celebration of the many parts of the one body of Christ and what it is exactly that they are doing together. Written to a church in conflict, hear the Word of the Lord:

“For 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. And I will show you a still more excellent way.”

My friend Chris Bishop, the new director of a community organizing agency called Helping Empower Local People¹, often asks the question, ‘what is the soul of our city?’ The question was handed down to him by one of the feistiest Catholic nuns I have ever met and I have heard him pose it enough times now that it ruminates in my heart most every day. And in a holiday week when we celebrate the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who challenged us to look hard at the soul of our country, and at what it is that we as a people who have been born and into this time and place together are to be striving for, the question seems particularly poignant.

¹ HELP is an affiliate organization of the Industrial Areas Foundation (www.industrialareasfoundation.org).

But , the answers that we tend to think of are usually somewhat amorphous. As one scholar points out, ‘Unity in diversity’ is one catchphrase that comes to mind.² And, don’t get me wrong, it is a good one, to be sure. But I also think that there is more to it than that.

I think Paul was trying to help the people flesh out a similar question when he wrote to the church in Corinth. What is the soul of your congregation, Corinthians? You see, there was a problem in the church in Corinth. It seems that some members or groups within the congregation were arguing that the soul of the church rested in them. In their strengths. Their vision. Their gifts- with all others being subordinate to all that they had to offer. They were using their gifts to either tear down or take over the church and so, in response, Paul constructs one of the most meaningful metaphors to grace the pages of scripture. “For just as the body is one and has many members... 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?”

It is easy to take this metaphor for granted because we have grown so accustomed to it. A singular body with many wonderfully diverse parts, each essential to the whole albeit in sometimes mysterious ways. It is a concept that has certainly gotten me through the day plenty of times when confronting an entire world of people who do not think and function exactly like me. Unity in diversity. That is our goal, right? That is what Paul is trying to hold before us after all, isn’t it? Couldn’t this be the essence of the soul of our churches and our city-of our Christian community that struggles to live and wrestle within itself in love- that we are called to understand ourselves as being unified despite diverse parts, tolerant of all of our members and somehow more highly functioning because of them?

There is certainly something to be said for this notion of Christian unity, but I think that Paul is driving at something else here. The distinction is both obvious and subtle, but absolutely essential to understanding who we are as a people of God. When we look at our own body and consider its parts- hands and feet, rib cage and heart, eyes and brain, kneecaps and fingernails- we don’t think of these parts in terms of diversity. We think of them in terms of dependence. And not just their dependence one upon the other, but their utter interdependence. So that we don’t just see ourselves as a sum of our parts, but as an integral whole. So it is with the body of Christ. It sounds silly, but when I have a sore throat I always say that I will never take my throat for granted again. Because when my throat is sore, I can’t eat, so my stomach gets empty, my body gets weak, and I get dizzy, and can’t work. When my throat is sore I also can’t speak, so I can’t communicate the ideas that my brain has been working on and cannot tell the people I care about that I love them or sing praise to God. Suddenly, because something is amiss in one tiny part of my body, I can’t live into the fullness of life. Working in the hospital, this drama of

² Farris, Stephen. Commentary on 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a in The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts: The Second Readings: Acts and the Epistles. (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans) 2001. P. 207.

interdependence was crystallized for me in much more serious ways. When the condition of an organ could trigger a reaction in the blood that would shut down the entire system. This is interdependence.

This is the kind of relationship that Paul was talking about. A relationship within a community of faith that understands itself as being utterly dependant upon the well being of each and every one of its parts. And where each of its parts understands that it is absolutely critical to the functioning of the whole. So that there is no distinction among the parts in terms of significance, only uniqueness of function. How often it is that we need to hear this message. “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 (that) 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.”

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” Something tells me that this idea stands at the core of what is- or ought to be- the soul of our city and is at the heart of what it means to be truly one in Christ as a community of faith. As we wade through so many issues as a church, as we seek to be disciples of a living gospel in a complex world and in Charlotte, it means that we take seriously the fact that if one member of our body cries out, we are all pained. If one part is broken, we all suffer. If one is victimized then we are all downtrodden. If one member is impaired, we sacrifice the fullness of our lives until that member is restored to theirs. If one member over functions, then the whole system becomes unhealthy. And if all do not do their part, then the whole will surely fail. It is an issue of justice. It is an issue of action. And it is an issue of faith. For in the Spirit of Christ we have been baptized together into one body and filled with the breath of life. So we must choose to tend to each of our members for the health of the entire body is at stake and our character as a people of God is on the line. This is the soul of our community of faith- that we are surely one in Christ. And that should mean something for how we look at the world and live our lives today.

In one of his sermons in the collection, The Strength to Love³, Dr. King spoke of an experience he had after becoming a part of the Montgomery bus protest. Threatening phone calls had become commonplace at his house, but in the middle of one night he received a particularly disturbing one. He told his congregation, “I hung up (the phone), but I could not sleep. It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point. I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally, I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing to be a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I determined to take my problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. “I am here

³ In A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper 1986). P. 509.

taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone." At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever." Almost at once my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything....let us remember that there is a great Power in the universe whose name is God, and he is able to make a way out of no way, and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. This is our hope for becoming better men. This is our mandate for seeking to make a better world."

"If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." We are the body Christ, and have been anointed by the Spirit to live out that calling in the flesh. To stand up for righteousness and truth, with God at our side forever. May we find the courage to address the suffering of our many members and rejoice together when the soul of our community reflects that we are truly one in the Lord. Amen.