

We Are the Church Together

1 Corinthians 12 (Selected Verses)

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins
The Presbytery of New Harmony
February 28, 2015

This morning I want to focus on a topic about which I have a good deal of passion, and that is the Church as the Body of Christ. Certainly, the notion that the church is the Body of Christ has its roots in the teaching of Paul, most notably in the passage I just read from 1 Corinthians. A large part of Presbyterian faith and practice as I have experienced it in my lifelong journey as a Presbyterian is a strong emphasis on the unity of the Christian church, even in the midst of diverse opinions and perspectives.

It's been a long time since I have studied any of the sciences. And so instead of trying to remember my high school biology and remedial anatomy, I did what most any modern-minded adult would do today to find information—I Googled. I Googled the human body, and the first page that came up was one that took me through ten internal systems in the human body: the skeletal system, the digestive system, the muscular system, the lymphatic system, the endocrine system, the nervous system, the cardiovascular system, the male and female reproductive systems, and the urinary system.

Then I clicked on the one I thought might be the most simple one to understand—the skeletal system. After all, how complicated can bones get? But then in the skeletal system I discovered terms like interosseous membrane, iliolumbar ligament, xiphoid process of sternum, the medial malleolus. When I saw that there was a bone called the humerus, I assumed that it must be the funny bone... but it's not. Suddenly the skeletal system became much more complex than I had previously assumed.

My point is this: The human body is an incredibly complex organism. To think of all the systems that have to be working just right in concert with one another, just to do simple tasks—it blows the mind. Do you know how many things need to be working together just to clinch a fist? Or blink your eyes? Or taste the heat of a jalapeno? The human body is incredibly complex.

The complexity of the human body is what makes Paul's description of the church such a brilliant one. "The body is a unit," he notes, "though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body..."¹ Paul says the church is the body of Christ, likening the church to a human body with many parts. And in order for the whole body to perform as it is supposed to perform, every part must do what it is designed to do.

There are many parts, but there is only one body. That's something we need to hear. One body.

There are two things that Paul says in this morning's text that I want to highlight in terms of what it means for us to be together as many parts in one body.

The first thing Paul says is that no part of the body can say of itself, "I don't matter." "If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' [the foot] would

¹ 1 Corinthians 12:12-13a

not for that reason cease to be part of the body.”² Don’t you see—Paul is cautioning us against thinking that any of us is unimportant. Every part of the body has a special role to play, a special function to carry out.

One of the primary principles about the way we organize and govern ourselves in the Presbyterian Church (USA) is to guarantee that everyone has a voice. To be sure, the majority makes the decisions, but special care is always given to allow every voice the opportunity to be heard. Even when there is a majority voice that prevails, all voices in the conversation are important and have a vital contribution to make to what we do and how we operate.

One of my pet peeves is to hear someone, either at a Presbytery meeting or a Session meeting or a committee meeting, say after the meeting, “I didn’t agree with the final result, but I didn’t want to speak up because it was obvious that my opinion wasn’t going to matter anyway.” The truth is, if the church is going to be a body, we need every part in order to make the body do what it’s supposed to do. If you fail to share your opinion or offer your services because you think you don’t matter, then the whole body will suffer. No part of the body can say “I don’t matter.” Even if you know your opinion may not prevail, as a part of the Body you have a responsibility to the rest of us, to let us know how you feel.

You matter in the body of Christ.

Over the years as a pastor I have been with many families in the cardiac testing waiting area of hospitals. One of their loved ones is having an angiogram or some similar test, and the cardiologist comes out and shows the family a picture of the patient’s heart. The cardiologist points to a tiny blood vessel and says, “Here is where the blockage is,” or something like that. Then they have to make plans to insert a stent, or to schedule bypass surgery.

Because you see, the bottom line is that even that tiny blood vessel is indispensable to the pumping of the heart. If that tiny blood vessel isn’t working, then BOOM, everything comes to a halt.

Never say that you don’t matter in the body of Christ.

The second way that Paul underscores the importance of every part of the body of Christ is by saying that one part cannot think of another as dispensable. “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!’”³ You see, God has created the church and called the church into being in such a way that we need each other. The preacher cannot say she doesn’t need the usher; nor can the usher say he doesn’t need the Sunday school teacher; nor can the Sunday school teacher say she doesn’t need the kitchen volunteers.

Neither can the conservative say to the liberal, “I don’t need you,” or vice-versa. Nor can white say to the black, “I don’t need you.” The truth is, we all need each other; none is indispensable in the body of Christ. No one can say to another, “You’re not necessary.”

No one has a right to say to any other part of the body of Christ, “You don’t matter.” Don’t you see—it doesn’t matter which part you are in the body of Christ, because every part is important. The body of Christ needs you. The body of Christ is not whole if every part is not able to do what it is designed to do. If one part suffers, the whole body suffers.

One of the things that I really appreciate about the Presbyterian Church (USA) is our commitment to the unity of the church. And that is a difficult commitment to keep. In the

² 1 Corinthians 12:15-16

³ 1 Corinthians 12:21

section of the Book of Order titled “Foundations of Presbyterian Polity,” one of the undergirding principles of how we are the church is a commitment to the unity of the church. It says that “the church is one because it belongs to its one Lord, Jesus Christ. The Church,” it says, “seeks to include all people and is never content to enjoy the benefits of Christian community for itself alone.”⁴

Paul says, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”⁵ There is one body. And we’re in it together.

Some of the folks in the Presbytery office, and on the Council, when they asked me to preach at this meeting, they said, “Share your heart.”

And I said, “Are you sure?” Because, in a lot of ways, my heart has been broken about what’s been going on in our denomination and in our presbytery. It has been broken because of the pain that I have seen being exchanged by people of different sides of the issues. For over three years now this Presbytery has been experiencing the same turmoil that has gripped the larger denomination, namely, an alarming exodus of congregations from our fellowship.

Look, I get it. There have been a number of troubling decisions made by the General Assembly, including one or two that we’ll be debating this morning. Frankly, I believe the Assembly has erred, seriously erred, in some of its positions. There has been much disagreement, and a good bit of conflict over what to do about our disagreement.

Folks, I get it. I’ve seen individuals and families walk away in protest. I’ve experienced the same hand-wringing that many of you have experienced when it comes to the implications for our budgets.

But the longer I have been a pastor, the more I find myself resisting the temptation to separate from those who think differently. I can only attribute that to a heartfelt conviction that God called me to ministry in this part of the body of Christ, and God has called me to love those whom I have been called to serve. Not love them or leave them. Just to love them. Just to love you.

In my heart of hearts I believe that the body of Christ cannot afford the cost of separation and schism. The truth is, we belong to each other in the body of Christ. Red and yellow, black and white, conservative and liberal and everything in-between—we belong to each other. One side can’t say to another, “I don’t need you.” Our unity in Christ won’t allow us to do that.

Throughout these years, I’ve kept going back in my mind to Rodney King, and the L.A. riots. He wasn’t a Presbyterian, I don’t think. He wasn’t a great theologian. I don’t know that he was much of a churchman. But in terms of summing up where we need to be in our disputes, I think he hit the nail on the head: “Why can’t we just all get along?”

There’s a profound ecclesiology in that statement.

If I’m going to be honest, I’ve been part of the finger-pointing, and the whispering. I need to repent of my own spirit, and I ask others to join with me in repenting. I’d like to say something to folks on either side of this issue today.

To those sessions and congregations who are considering dismissal, let me say a couple of things. First, I respect your decision to engage in a difficult but necessary conversation and period of discernment; we need to be open and honest about our concerns, and how to respond. Second, I know that the church isn’t immune from the brokenness

⁴ Book of Order, 2011-2013 edition, F-1.0302a

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:27

created by our sinfulness, and so there are times when “the bonds of unity are stretched and ecclesiastical connections frayed over issues of conscience to the point of considering disaffiliation.” We recognize that there are instances when a church’s conscience is strained to the point of needing to consider the denominational relationship; that’s why we put a process in place. I hope that you will honor our process, imperfect though it may be; and I hope that the PRTs assigned to work with congregations will listen with a spirit of understanding and openness—the call to honor each other goes both ways; we make far less progress when we approach one another in a spirit of suspicion, than we do when we approach one another in mutual respect and trust. Finally, I hope that your process will lead you to a decision to stay; but if you choose to leave, you need to know that even a gracious process is difficult and painful. This Presbytery will be diminished without you. The PC(USA) will be diminished without you. Even under the best of circumstances it hurts when a part of the body is excised—the excised part hurts, and the body that remains also hurts.

To the rest of the Presbytery, I say this: Don’t demonize those sessions and congregations that are wrestling with this discussion. Love them. Pray for them. Speak the truth in love to them. Remind them of their importance in this body, that we need each other.

In just a few moments we will observe the Lord’s Supper. It is a sacrament that proclaims our reconciliation with Christ, and it reminds us that reconciliation with Christ compels reconciliation with one another. At the table Christ invites all to come to him. The sacrament is a declaration of our being joined to Christ through his love and forgiveness, and it calls us to be joined to one another with the same spirit of love and forgiveness.

Paul says, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each of you is a part of it.”

As the children’s song goes, I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together.

We are the church, not by ourselves or on our own, but TOGETHER.

Amen.