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First Presbyterian Church, Willmar, MN
January 27, 2019
1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a

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One Body with Many Members

12 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.¹³For 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.

14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.¹⁵If the foot were to 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.¹⁶And if the ear were to 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.¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be?²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body.²¹The 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.'²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,²³and 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;²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member,²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.²⁸And 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.²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do

all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But strive for the greater gifts.

Have you ever been a part of a team that was like a well-oiled machine? Where every person moved in harmony with the other, with each person singularly focused on a greater goal and working together for a common good? An early experience I had with this was working as a camp counselor at Upper Missouri Ministries Lutheran Bible Camp near Williston, ND as a young college aged kid.

We had some terrifically gifted staff members those summers. I remember how each one had unique gifts and talents that they brought to the ministry and how each one used them to enhance the summer camp experience for the campers. There was Matt B, who could dance moves like Michael Jackson. And Matt M, who could tell stories and make anyone feel included. And Steve, who was our summer camp leader, unassuming, but wise beyond his years, and with a wonderful sense of playfulness and fun. And Paula, who could make each of her campers feel loved and included, because she made it a point to personally connect with each one. And there was this cute counselor from South Dakota, who could sing, and act, and whose smile lit up the room...

We did some amazing things those summers at UMM, sharing the love of Christ in a safe, fun, outdoor setting. I have no doubt that the Holy Spirit was at work in and through us as we worked together as a body of believers united in Christ's mission those summers. When I read Paul's teaching in today's text about the body of Christ, and how we are all part of that body, with no part being of more importance than another, and each one working in harmony towards a greater good, I couldn't help but think of those summers at camp. I got to see it at work on the staff, with each one of us, whether we were an "eye," an "ear," or a "nose," contributing meaningfully towards our mission.

That's how a healthy church is meant to function - As a living body of believers with different gifts and backgrounds coming together for a greater purpose. And it is our constant aim as a church to work towards a life together like Paul describes. So I'd like to dig deeper into his teaching to help us know what that looks like.


First of all, God's vision for the church as a body **is inclusive:**

Paul starts off today's passage by saying, "12 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.¹³ 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." We miss something by glossing over this passage in a quick reading. But what Paul is saying is that the Spirit of God unites people together in the body of Christ who were formerly *forbidden* to have meaningful interactions with each other. For instance, Jewish laws forbid eating at the same table as a Greek (read, non-Jew). Nor were they allowed to enter a Greek home. They didn't share the same culture or language or customs. Not only that, but Paul lists slaves and free together in the body, and that day and age, the slave was decidedly inferior to the free person and the slave was meant to serve the free, and anything else was scandalous.

In another passage, from Galatians 3: 28, Paul writes similar words, "28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is *no longer male and female*; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Here is adding yet more inclusivity in the church, there is no longer *male or female*. In those days women did not take part in public or political life, they were forbidden from higher learning, entering places of prominence in the Temple, having a place in the public square. But here Paul is saying that, once one is made a part of the body of Christ in one's baptism, the radically inclusive Holy Spirit makes all an essential part of the body. God's spirit is inclusive.

Why is this so? And how does this operate? It's because once we are joined to Christ in our baptisms, we assume a new identity that supersedes our old. Our primary identity is no longer an earthly label, but it is beloved child of God. So, just like Paul writes, there is no longer Greek nor Jew, no longer slave nor free, we might say, there is no longer black nor white, rich nor poor, Scandinavian nor Latino, American nor European, nor any label we use to identify by, rather, there is only beloved child of God.

On Friday night the nurture and fellowship committee of our church hosted an event with chili and a movie. The movie was, "Won't You Be My Neighbor." Which told the story of PBS icon and selfsame host of, "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood." One of the things that I maybe didn't realize fully until Friday night, was how much Fred, who was a Presbyterian minister, "got" this radically



inclusive vision of the Gospel. He lived it and he taught it in his show, and it was there in plain sight once you knew to look for it. For instance, Fred had a guest on his show one time, a little 10 year old boy named Jeff Erlander. Jeff was in a wheelchair due to spinal disease, with braces on his legs, chest and arms. Jeff was going to face a major surgery, and his parents, knowing that Jeff loved Mr. Rogers, got him on the show. A lovely scene unfolded when Fred Rogers met Jeff, they talked for a bit, and then Fred asked Jeff if he could sing this song for him.

It's You I Like, by Fred Rogers

It's you I like

It's not the things you wear

It's not the way you do your hair,

It's you I like

The way you are right now

The way down deep inside you

Not the things that hide you

Not your fancy chair

That's just beside you

But it's you, I like

Every part of you

Your skin, your eyes, your feelings

Whether old, or new

I hope that you remember

Even when, you're feeling blue

That it's you I like, It's you yourself

It's you,

It's you I like.

This is the radically inclusive vision of the Gospel. Imagine God singing this love song to you. You are accepted, you are loved. Not because of what you do. Nothing you could ever do, could make God love you anymore. God's love preempts that. You're included.

Not only is the Body of Christ, the church, meant to be inclusive, it is also meant to **be egalitarian:**

Dictionary.com defines egalitarian as, "asserting, resulting from, or characterized by belief in the equality of all people, especially in political, economic, or social life."¹ Classically, theologians have said something along the lines of, "The ground is level at the foot of the cross." In other words, we all stand equally in need of God's saving grace. It's always Gods'

¹ Dictionary.com. "egalitarian." Accessed Jan 25, 2019.

initiative which is at work in our lives to free us from sin and death and renew us into new life in him. There are no superlatively excellent people who are closer to heaven without Christ than another, not by an inch or a mile, or a fraction thereof. That's how God's grace works, it's all God's love, all of the time: 100% God, and 0% us. That's what makes us all equal in God's eyes. And this egalitarianism is preserved in Paul's metaphor of the body. Traditionally in Paul's day, metaphors of the body were used to describe the empire or the military and to assert the dominance of certain body parts, such as the head, "ruling," over the others. This created a hierarchy, which the metaphor supported. But did you notice the great pains that Paul used in order to assert the importance of the "inferior members," indeed he says, "But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member." And he states that no member may say to another, "I have no need of you."

Each part is important, each part is essential to the operation of the body. So much so, that when one part is hurting, the rest of the organism suffers along with it. Paul writes, "²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." This is part of our charter as a church, that we live in such harmony with each other that when one feels pain, we all do, and that when one celebrates, we all celebrate.

How we, as Presbyterians, have attempted to live out this model of egalitarianism is in line with how the Protestant Reformers such as John Calvin articulated this idea in a doctrine called, "The Priesthood of all Believers." This is the idea, that's God's radically inclusive and egalitarian church allows direct access to God, without an intermediary such as priest, bishop, or pope. "God is equally accessible to **all** the faithful, and **every** Christian has equal potential to minister for God."² Therefore when we set up our church leadership structure, we don't elevate our leaders above the people, but rather choose and elect ruling elders and deacons from among the people to serve the church for terms of time based on the presence of gifts for service. All who are baptized and profess faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior are equal in God's sight and our life together as a church is meant to emphasize that as well.

So, Christ's church is radically **inclusive, and egalitarian**. And, finally, it is also rightly meant to **be diverse**.

² Wikipedia.com. "Universal priesthood." Accessed Jan 25, 2019.

This is inherent in the metaphor isn't it? With Paul's use of the diverse organs, the "ear," the "eye," the "nose." And the metaphor works, because human beings are inherently diverse. There was great friction in the early church about this very issue. But despite this disagreement, Paul and others were adamant that this new thing, the church, the very Body of Christ was to be so radically inclusive that it meant that the Greeks or Gentiles were to be included as equal members of the church. Despite the fact they didn't eat kosher foods, that they weren't circumcised, that they may not know the Torah, and were often ignorant of the Jewish law. This was no small deal for Apostles. You can read all about how this was resolved, with some degree of conflict, by these Apostles in the Book of Acts. But the fact that you and I are sitting here today, means that they recognized that God's Spirit was including the Gentiles. And not just any Gentiles: slaves, women, the uncircumcised, the Roman centurions, the eunuchs, the prostitutes, the Samaritans, and the tax collectors. The model set by Jesus in his earthly ministry to reach out to, and include, these folks, was a radical model set for the early church to emulate.

So, what does that mean for us today? Well, we need to look out into our communities and try to identify who our gentiles, slaves, eunuchs, centurions, prostitutes, and tax collectors are. We need to ask ourselves, does the diversity of our church reflect the diversity of our community? Because if it's not, you can be that God's Spirit is prodding and promoting us to go out in Jesus name to make it more so. Is our church as diverse in age, gender, race, or ethnicity as our community? Probably not. So we probably have some work cut out for us.

God has set forth a radical vision for us as church. One that is **inclusive, egalitarian, and diverse**. It's one that we may have to work to achieve, and if it were under our own power, we may never achieve. But the good news in all of this is that it isn't all under our own power. It is God's church. We are God's people. It is the Holy Spirit at work in our lives binding us together into one body. It is the Holy Spirit at work in our lives freeing us to live lives characterized by inclusive love. Maybe what's required of us is a bit of a heart check, and a deepened sense of radical dependence on this inclusive, loving, God. After all, isn't it Christ that brought us together in the first place? Isn't it?

Alleluia and Amen.