

“Imagining a New Old Church: Who Belongs?”

Sermon Preached by David D. Colby

Central Presbyterian Church

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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

The beginning of my sermon title is taken from a book by Diana Butler Bass that pastors and elders in our presbytery are being encouraged to read this year. Her book examines how churches are experiencing new vitality through innovative engagement with traditional Christian practices. I like the title, “Imagining A New Old Church.”¹ To explore some very contemporary questions about the church, I want to turn back in time to the founder of churches, the Apostle Paul, and his writings to a very conflicted church that he had founded, the church in Corinth. Today, this passage about the body having many members. Next week that famous passage on love. And on February 4th, Paul’s passing down of the communion story, from Jesus’ last supper to the community meal.

As we read through these letters dashed off from the traveling Paul back to the church he helped found, in the words of Gary Wills, we “travel back into the Spirit-haunted, God-driven world of Paul in the heady first charismatic days of Jesus’ revelation.”² Heady as those days were, as recent as Jesus’ revelation, the problem Paul faced is that these churches were made up of humans. And they made a mess of things. A careful reading of First Corinthians makes you realize that Paul is writing a masterful work, trying to heal conflicts and keep them from splitting off into factions. Much like Abraham Lincoln, whose overarching goal was to “preserve the union,” Paul throws himself headlong into a persuasive theological argument to keep the newborn church from splitting off into factions.

So what were those folks in Corinth fighting about? Marriage, sex, power, meals - if you name the topic, they were fighting about it!³ It seemed every issue became an argument for them with two opposing sides. Does that sound at all like our days in America, in which every issue for debate has the ability to become controversial and polarize? For a modern example, rather than rationally discussing the best strategies to protect the environment for our children and grandchildren, global warming gets used as a political football, with two sides trying to move the ball down the field each with a sideline full of fans yelling “push it down their throat!” Same thing was happening in Corinth. Every issue became the source of a power struggle, with different factions trying to win at all costs and force out the others. Winner take all. What it came down to though, was whether there was room enough for different people. In these fights, all were right in their own eyes and the Corinthians were trying to push out the other church members with whom they disagreed.

In the face of these fights, Paul responds with a theological argument. Paul took a “big tent” approach to the church. For Paul, purity of opinions, even on important issues, was trumped by God’s grace in calling people together into the body of Christ. Over and over, Paul tries to find the right metaphor to hold the church together. Two weeks ago, we read from the

beginning of this twelfth chapter in which Paul emphasizes that “there are different gifts, but it is the same Spirit.”

The basic problem was that the Corinthians thought they did not need each other anymore. They started to rank spiritual gifts, inflating the value of their own gifts and downplaying the gifts of others and thought that they could make it on their gifts alone. They thought they were better than everybody else. To try to stop the spread of this cancerous thinking, Paul insists that varieties of gifts are activated and allotted “just as the Spirit chooses” and that they are “to be used for the common good.”

But Paul did not stop his argument there. He launches right into a metaphor to try and bolster his argument. “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” (1 Cor. 12:12). He is trying to do a tough thing, we should note. This Corinthian church has some pretty impressive diversity. As Paul says, “Jews or Greeks, slaves or free” we “were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). Think about it. A church made up of slaves and freepersons, Jews and Greeks – trying to create a community of equality. Back in the 1960s a Southern evangelical named Clarence Jordan wrote a translation of the Bible he called the Cotton Patch Bible. And he translates this diversity into the Southern reality of the time “That’s the way it is with Christ. For through one Spirit we all – whether whites or Negroes, laborers or white-collar workers – were initiated into one body.”⁴ For saying things like this Clarence Jordan’s Christian community was the target of racist threats and violence.

Here is where Paul’s argument is so revolutionary, even correcting any prejudices that he himself might have shared with his contemporaries. Paul would go so far as to say in his letter to the Galatians that all our human distinctions and prejudices are overcome within the community of the church. In Christ, Paul says, “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” (Galatians 3:28). In Christ, everyone belongs. All gifts are given by the Spirit. All members have a needed role. Every unique identity is held together by God’s unifying Spirit.

Paul has a challenge on his hands, trying to hold together this church made up of Jews and Greeks, slaves and free. And so he uses this metaphor of the church as a body with many members. He emphasizes that just like our bodies, which are made up of different parts – hands, eyes, ears, feet – each with different purposes, so too with the church. Whoever heard of a group of feet calling themselves a body? Paul presses on, using humor to make a serious point.

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. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? . . . The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you. (1 Cor 12:16-17, 21)

Gary Wills writes, Paul’s belief that they are all members of Christ leads to the corollary that they are members of each other. . . This is the deeper meaning of the “Golden Rule” (Mt 7.12, Lk 6.31) – not simply that you should treat others as you would be treated, but treat them as if they were you (because *they are*).”⁵

So, for Paul, there can be no discussion of the question who belongs as if the church could cast out some who did not belong. It would be as foolish as a convention of body parts in which the toes brought a resolution to kick out the fingers. We are part of a body that is not of our making. We are members of Christ's body. Different, yes. Unique, absolutely. Yet all called into something greater than the sum of its parts. Even the weakest parts, Paul says, "are indispensable."

In some places, Paul's argument is difficult for us to follow. He probably never knew that this letter written for such a specific time and for specific people would be collected into sacred scripture and read two thousand years later. So he goes into small distinctions that we cannot fully know. Apparently, on some of these divisive arguments, there was a "strong group," and a "weak group."

We don't really know which was the strong group and what they stood for, and which was the weak group and what they stood for. We don't know if they called themselves that, or if that is Paul's description of their argument. But there is this slightly odd part of this letter in which Paul launches from the body metaphor into a discussion of weak and strong members, respectable members and inferior members.

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. (1 Cor 12:21-26)

We cannot know for certain what Paul means with this description of members that are more honorable and others that are less respectable. Is he still talking about body parts, with this mention of inferior members needing glamorous clothing? I think back to when I was a youth pastor in a previous church. Is this some kind of dress code aimed at teenagers in the church who were wearing low-cut jeans and high-cut shirts?

In any case, there were divisions between strong and weak. Maybe it was a self-conscious separation between new members and long-time members. Or maybe some thought they were strong because of their wealth while others were weak because of their lack of wealth. Or maybe some were thought to be strong because of the quality of their argument on a debated issue. It is not clear, but what is clear, is Paul's belief that no one can think themselves too strong, too pure, too right to separate off from the others. "The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you.'"

Anne Lamott is a member of a small Presbyterian Church, Saint Andrew Presbyterian Church in Marin City, California. She calls it a funky little church. It's about half of our size,

with about fifty percent of its members black and 50 percent whites, Asians, Hispanics and others.⁶ While it is a pretty liberal church, the different members with different cultural backgrounds sometimes create tension. Lamott tells a story that bridges Paul's beliefs with some of the issues facing the contemporary church.

One of our newer members, a man named Ken Nelson, is dying of AIDS, disintegrating before our very eyes. He came in a year ago with a Jewish woman who comes every week to be with us, although she does not believe in Jesus. Shortly after the man with AIDS started coming, his partner died of the disease. A few weeks later Ken told us that right after Brandon died, Jesus had slid into the hole in his heart that Brandon's loss left, and had been there ever since. Ken has a totally lopsided face, ravaged and emaciated, but when he smiles, he is radiant. He looks like God's crazy nephew Phil. He says that he would gladly pay any price for what he has now, which is Jesus, and us.

There's a woman in the choir named Ranola who is large and beautiful and jovial and black and as devout as can be, who has been a little standoffish toward Ken. She has always looked at him with confusion, when she looks at him at all. Or she looks at him sideways, as if she wouldn't have to quite see him if she didn't look at him head on. She was raised in the South by Baptists who taught her that his way of life – that he – was an abomination. It is hard for her to break through this. I think she and a few other women at church are, on the most visceral level, a little afraid of catching the disease. But Kenny has come to church almost every week for the last year and won almost everyone over. He finally missed a couple of Sundays when he got too weak, and then a month ago he was back, weighing almost no pounds, his face even more lopsided, as if he'd had a stroke. Still, during the prayers of the people, he talked joyously of his life and his decline, of grace and redemption, of how safe and happy he feels these days.

So on this one particular Sunday, for the first hymn . . . we sang "Jacob's Ladder," which goes, "Every rung goes higher, higher," while ironically Kenny couldn't even stand up. But he sang away sitting down, with the hymnal in his lap. And then when it came time for the second hymn . . . we were to sing "His Eye Is on the Sparrow." The pianist was playing and the whole congregation had risen – only Ken remained seated, holding the hymnal in his lap – and we began to sing, "Why should I feel discouraged?" "Why do the shadows fall?" And Ranola watched Ken rather skeptically for a moment, and then her face began to melt and contort like his, and she went to his side and bent down to lift him up – lifted up this white rag doll, this scarecrow. She held him next to her, draped over and against her like a child while they sang.⁷

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. 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. (1 Cor 12:12, 26-27)

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Diana Butler Bass, The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church (Alban Institute, 2004) 3.

² Garry Wills, What Paul Meant (New York: Viking, 2006) 177.

³ See Calvin Roetzel's The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context, third edition (Westminster/John Knox Press 1991) 87-99 for an excellent summary of the Corinthian correspondence and the issues addressed.

⁴ Clarence Jordan, The Cotton Patch Version of Paul's Epistles (A Koinonia Publication, 1968) 65.

⁵ Wills, 53.

⁶ Don Speich, "Minister a Perfect Match for Marin City Flock," in Marin Independent Journal, 12 February 2006, www.marinij.com/lifestyles/ci_3499290 tells the story of this church and their current pastor.

⁷ Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith (New York, Pantheon Books, 1999) 63-65.