

12 September 2021

What's Good about the Church? Wholeness in Mutuality

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

We read from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, verses 12-26:

¹²For 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.

¹⁴Indeed, 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.

We've started a sermon series looking at what is *good* about the church. In our time of denominational hand-wringing and despair, I thought it would be refreshing to be reminded of what there is to love about the fellowship of Jesus Christ. Just as importantly, I suspect that if we can keep these things in mind, we might approach our challenges with more hope. So I'm looking at how the New Testament describes the church, and – where appropriate – at examples of times when we have lived up to our description. Last week I talked about how both Christ and the New Testament church aimed at a community that included everyone, bringing together traditional enemies and welcoming social outcasts. The church acknowledges no walls. So that was about *who* the church is. Today I want to talk about *how*. Once you create this motley assortment of the weird, how do they function?

Paul's answer, found in Romans and Ephesians, but most clearly in 1 Corinthians, is that we function as an organic body, made up of different, equal parts, constituting One. Each of us is different, having been given different gifts by the Spirit, but as all our gifts are from the same Spirit, so the combination of all our different gifts constitutes one body. Each of us needs everyone else to be complete.

Now – speaking to my those my age and older – if your church experience in the 1970s was anything like mine, you've heard a lot of messages from this passage, focusing on Spiritual Gifts. They were all the rage that decade. We all took little Spiritual Gift Inventories, personality

tests designed around Paul's three various lists of Spiritual Gifts, then checked our results against the key to see what the Spirit had given us. Once we had determined our gifts in this scientific manner, the nominating committee would descend upon us like wolves and sign us up for the right committee or job. You see why churches loved this stuff, right? It not only helped with leadership enlistment, but it implied that it wasn't the nominating committee that was recruiting you, it was the Holy Spirit. You're not going to quench the Spirit, are you? Great! None of this was really bad – we do need volunteers to keep the church running, and it's good to put volunteers in areas of their giftedness – but like most things that become fashionable, the Spiritual Gift racket also got overdone and began to feel stale. I haven't preached on this passage since the 1990s.

Today, though, I don't want to talk about gifts. Instead, I want to look at the underlying concept of the passage, that we are all individual, but are equally a part of the whole. Our individual gifts were given to us *not for our own benefit, but to benefit the whole body*. The Spirit does not give us gifts so that we can be, you know, gifted; the Spirit gives us gifts so that we can give ourselves to others. Our gifts are significant only as a part of the larger whole, and if we separate from the community, those gifts become useless for their intended purpose.

Paul uses the analogy of a body to express this. An eye is a marvelous organ. But an eye separated from the rest of the body, or a body made up only of eyes, is useless (and, frankly, creepy). To be whole, we need each other. *All* of us. Because of that mutual dependence, Paul goes on, there are no members of the body that are more important than any others. He uses a complicated and slightly cringe-worthy analogy having to do with certain body parts that are less “presentable” than others, an analogy I am *not* going to go into detail on. But his point is still important: some members of the community will have more “presentable” gifts – by which I think he means, “gifts that involve public roles” in the church. Teachers and preachers and people like that use their gifts in front of others, or they're doing it wrong, but that has nothing to do with importance. Those who have quiet, behind-the-scenes roles are just as valuable and, if anything, should be treated with *greater* respect than the ones with public positions, because those showboats get enough recognition as it is. The picture Paul paints is of a community in which everyone is different, but equally valued, and where individual gifts are given for one reason: to support the rest of the community in their shared purpose.

To understand how radical this picture is, we need to compare it to the social structure of the Roman Empire, in which context this letter was written. The Roman Empire was a rigidly stratified society, which you can visualize as a sort of pyramid. The emperor was at the top, followed by the Roman nobility and the emperor's court. Below them are the wealthy landowners, then merchants and soldiers, then farm laborers and slaves at the bottom. Those higher on the pyramid had rights and privileges that those beneath them didn't. Those at the lower levels depended on the benevolence (patronage) of their superiors and in return owed them their loyalty, or *gratis*. In times of peace, *gratis* meant taxes and service, and in times of war, *gratis* meant serving in their lord's militia. The only method of rising on the social pyramid was by a grant of patronage from someone higher up, which meant that most people just stayed stuck in the caste in which they were born. Compare that rigid, hierarchical structure to the radical equality and willing mutual dependence of the early church, and you realize that the church was scary different. No one *owed* anyone anything, but they gave it anyway. No one had greater

privileges than anyone else, because no one expected any privileges at all. No one was at the top of the heap, because there was no heap: slave and patrician, male and female, rich and poor, were all in the same boat, busily trying to care for each other.

So the early church was radically different from its original cultural context. How about our own context? How does Paul's picture of the church stack up against our own culture today? In some ways, better. For instance, we are not as rigidly stratified into castes as the Romans were. I don't mean to say that we have achieved complete equality, by any means. Rich people still hold most of the cards, and black and brown people have obstacles to overcome that others do not. But we're a whole lot better in this regard than the Romans were. At least the idea of equality in a church isn't *shocking* to us, as it would have been to the Romans. But we have a different cultural problem with the New Testament picture of the church: our individualism. We are raised to respect the "rugged individual," the completely self-sufficient person who asks nothing from anyone, requires no assistance or advice, but just picks himself up by his own bootstrap and makes his own way. Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*, as played by John Wayne. This is the portrait of the American archetypal hero. Our economic system is based on "enlightened self-interest," the notion that we'll all be better off if we ignore others and just take care of ourselves. Dependency on others is, for us, a sign of weakness and dubious morality. Our first American philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote "Self-Reliance," and the largest section in our bookstores – remember those? – was always Self-Help.

But the church that Paul describes is the exact opposite of that. The church is to be a place where we put others first – as Paul puts it in Romans 12, "outdo each other in showing honor to others." It is a place where we don't try to do things alone, but rather willingly submit ourselves to being dependent on each other. In that church, "enlightened self-interest" is an oxymoron. "Self-interest" is, by definition, a state of darkness. We value individuality in the church – everyone has different gifts, after all – but not individualism, the glorifying of the individual. In the Kingdom of God, "individual" is another way of saying, "not yet complete," because we are only whole together.

Here's a quick example of where our culture and the ideal of the church come into conflict: freedom and rights. These are central themes of our democratic society, and that's a good thing. I love our rights and freedoms as citizens. But they do tend to be about *my* rights and freedoms, and not yours. In recent months, the words "rights" and "freedom" have mostly seemed to refer to the right not to get a vaccine or to wear a mask. If someone infringes those rights, they're taking away our freedom! Listen to what I'm about to say. The Kingdom of God is different from the modern democratic state. In the Kingdom of God – which the church is supposed to reflect – we have no rights, and the only freedom that matters is the freedom to care for others. Jesus never said one word about "rights." The church of Jesus Christ is to be the place where we freely resign all our rights and submit ourselves to each other, and in that radical equality, that mutual submission, we become whole.

To be honest, I doubt that the church that Paul tried to describe has never really existed. Maybe some churches or religious communities have done better than others, for a while, I doubt for long. Not even the New Testament Church. The whole reason Paul wrote all that to the church at Corinth was because they were doing it badly. This stuff is hard! Just like the radical inclusion across all boundaries that I talked about last week is hard, this goes against our very

nature. But it's still what we're supposed to be aiming at, and to the extent that we are able to go against the grain of our self-centered culture, this is a very good thing about the church.