

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, June 12, 2022

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

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 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. And 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? 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 honourable we clothe with greater honour, 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 honour 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 honoured, 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.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

When I read this text, I can't help but think of Greg Schultz. Greg Schultz was my little league baseball coach when I was in major leagues. Now growing up we had t-ball, then coach's pitch, then minor league, then major league, then junior and senior all the way up. I need to tell you. I am not bragging. I was a killer t-ball player, coach's pitch. I was the guy you wanted up at the plate. Minor league I made the all-star team, did this travel in team for a little bit. Then I stopped growing, and everyone else kept growing. When we switched from coaches pitching to my peers pitching, all of a sudden, they were six inches taller than I was and they were standing on the mound and they weighed, I don't know, twenty twenty-five pounds more than I did. I became much less confident at the plate. When one of my peers would wind up and throw at me, I would duck out of the way. I am not quite sure why, but my dad didn't let me quit little league. I had to keep going. I don't know if I asked him to or not. I ended up playing all the way until I was in

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high school. By the time you're in high school, if you're playing little league baseball, you're not that great because you're probably supposed to be playing on the high school team, right? Greg Schultz drafted me in the coach's pitch.

He got one of the best players he could get, and then he drafted me again the next year and then the next year. He saw me transition and change over time in this way, but he was a great coach. He'd always put me at second base. It was where I was most comfortable, and I remember one particular play. The second base is a shorter throw. Your arm strength doesn't have to be all that good, and you have your area that you're covering. I remember there was a pop-up to short right field, and I turned around and took off running. I wanted to make up for my shortcomings at the plate, and so I was going to be the best fielder I could be. I ran as hard as I could in the direction of the ball, and so did the right fielder who happened to be a foot taller than I was and weigh about 20 more pounds. He was calling for it, but I wanted to call him off. He kept calling for it, and I didn't slow down. Y'all know what happened. We ran smack dab into each other, and he stood his ground because he didn't even know I'd hit him. I went tumbling, right?

There were a lot of embarrassments that I had as a young person, but wobbling, walking off the field and taking a seat on the bench was probably one of the worst. After the game, Coach Schultz came up to me. All the other kids had walked away, and he said "You know. I've been coaching you for a long time, and you need to know that I really believe in you. I believe in what you can do. You are a good fielder. You play that position really well, but I can't keep you there if you are unwilling to trust the people around you to do their job. When you ran really hard towards right field, when your friend called you off and you didn't listen to him, when you made the decision, I don't know when to run, and that that was going to be your ball to catch, you stopped trusting the people around you. I need you to play second base. That's where I put you. That's where your gifts and skills are. I don't need you trying to play any other position."

He stayed extra time with me that night, walked me to my car with my dad, and for the next couple weeks I tried to live on that lesson that he had given me. It was a really important one because what I've realized over time is that that lesson, of course, isn't just a baseball lesson, right? Paul is speaking somewhat to that. There are nine people on a baseball diamond, and then you have everyone that has a position with specific responsibilities that they are to carry out.

Paul didn't know what little league was, but what he knew is that there was this particular way that people from all sorts of different walks of life needed to be bound together. Paul knew that they would need an image. Maybe not a baseball diamond. Maybe not a team. Let's use the image of the body. Why is this image important? When we make unique claims as Christians. One of the most unique claims that we make is that God took on flesh, took on the clothing of humanity, as our call to worship said. To use the body, then, is to reiterate the incarnational nature of our faith. This is a unique thing that Paul is trying to tell the early church in Corinth. "You are the Body of Christ" he says. Then he goes through kind of comically, through the ways in which the body relates to itself. It's helpful for them because you can imagine there were some people in Corinth in that early church that were not playing their position. They had been gifted in particular ways. They had been given eyes to see, let's say

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and yet, they weren't using them as God intended, as would most build up the Body of Christ.

Paul says to them, "if 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. Or if the ear would say because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body, that would make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body was an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body was hearing, where would the sense of smell be?" He's trying to let them know each of you has been gifted in a particular way and brought together. It seems to me that there's actually a lot going on when Paul's communicating this to them. First of all, he's telling them that they are connected to the greater whole. We might think that's not something that people need to hear,

but what I have realized over time is that we need to be reminded that we belong to each other. Mother Teresa famously said, "If we have no peace today, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other." That man, that woman, that child, is my brother or my sister. If everyone could see the image of God in their neighbor, do you think that we would still need tanks and grenades?

We need to be reminded, beloved, that we belong to each other. That becomes critically important when we are navigating the more difficult parts of what it means to be a human.

The early Church needed to know that they belong to each other.

The second thing that I think Paul is doing, and this one is perhaps more profound for us. The Corinthians lived in a culture in a society under Roman rule that was mono in its culture. The idea was we are the empire all you need to do is fall in line and act the ways that we tell you you are supposed to act, and you will be protected. Paul is offering a completely counter illustration to what being faithful looks like because Paul knows that monoculture is not God's design. The image of the body is actually resistant to monoculture. Part of what Paul is doing is pushing back against the idea of the superiority of cultural homogeneity by saying that diversity is the design of the divine.

You aren't all an ear, an eye, a foot. You're all different, and that's exactly how it's supposed to be.

Don't listen to what you are hearing out in culture that tells you you're supposed to act a certain way or believe a certain thing right and then you'll be safe. No.

What we know is that the God of all creation has created each of you uniquely with different gifts and skills. God's design is that we might have unity in the midst of our diversity, and that we might be one body, hands, and feet head, and eyes.

It strikes me that that message is one that the Church failed to live into and continues to fail to live into. The early church in Corinth struggled with it, or Paul wouldn't have to talk about it.

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Even the Church now, we struggle with it as well. Last week about fifteen Idlewild Church folks and a bunch of other Presbyterians were part of the pride parade down on Beale Street. I was thinking about what it looks like to care for all the body and to respect all the different parts of the body. I was thinking about our beloved LGBTQIA Plus folk, who for a very long time, and even still, have not been told that they are fully a part of the body, or they have been told that they are somehow an inferior part. Both lies.

The church has often failed to live into this image that Paul so beautifully laid out for us so many years ago. In order to do that, we have to first claim the ways in which we haven't done that well, and then change by the power of the holy spirit and begin to walk in a brand new way.

There's something else that happened when my little league coach grabbed me after the game and walked with me besides trying to encourage me to play my position. He said, "You need to know that you are a part of this team. I have drafted you for the last three years, and I am going to draft you for the next three years because I love you and because you are a part of our family here."

So, we did. I would wait for the call in major leagues, and then junior league, and then the senior league. Every time, it would be Coach Shultz, and every time i would thank him. He would say, "I love you and you're a part of this family."

Hopefully what we're going to learn together over the next several weeks is that we are all connected to each other, bound to one another not by our own creativity or faithfulness but by the grace of God who decided long ago to take on flesh, to be the body in our midst, and then who gifted a teacher to say we are the Body of Christ, the Church.

What I hope is that we are reminded we are all connected, and our connection is critically important, that our diversity is actually our gift to the world. Not only is this image for us a reminder of our connection to each other, but it's also a call to action.

The end of this beautiful passage of scripture Paul says, "Now you are the Body of Christ." Individually members of it you.

You.

You.

This isn't a group of Corinthians a long time ago. It's you in flesh and blood sitting in this pew this morning together. You are the Body of Christ, and individually members of it. There's something beautiful about that charge. Teresa of Avila has a beautiful poem that speaks to the truth, but also the charge and the call to action that comes from being the body.

It's entitled "Christ Has No Body." The words of preparation were drawn from it.

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“Christ has no body but yours, church. No hands. no feet on earth but yours. No. Yours are the eyes with which Christ looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which He blesses all the world. Yours are the hands. yours of the feet. Yours are the eyes. You are the Body. Christ has nobody now but yours. No hands. No feet on Earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on His world. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

That means that we, beloved, are to be the Body of Christ to a world deeply in need of compassion and of care and of welcome and of belonging. Sometimes we've done that beautifully. Other times we have tragically failed. What I hope is that we learn over the next eight weeks together that each of us is uniquely a part of this body, gifted in particular ways. We are not all prophets, not all apostles, but all are a part of the body. It's a gift to us. It was a gift for Paul to the early Church. It is a gift to us this day. We'll spend the rest of the summer figuring out what that looks like and how we are connected to one another, and, indeed, all of creation.

Let's pray together.

God, we thank you for people and voices that remind us that we belong to each other, for Apostles of old and for little league coaches, for saints of your Church, and for the people sitting next to us in the pews this day. You know the ways that we're trying to be connected to this place, and you know the ways in which we're struggling. You know the transitions that we go through in life, and yet every time, you have a place for us to be connected here. You have a role in a ministry for us to do here. So, what we pray, Lord is that over the next several weeks together, your Spirit might fall fresh upon us, and it might enliven us, awaken us to what it is you're calling us to do and be. May we indeed be your body here. May we be that body, faithfully, and lovingly, and graciously. May we trust that you are offering that within us.

We ask in the name of Jesus Christ. And all God's People say together, Amen.