

The Church of the Good Shepherd

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Third Sunday after the Epiphany – January 27, 2019

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

My father died nine and a half years ago, and it still shocks me to say that. Always an active and healthy man, he seemed to fully inhabit his body and it functioned like a well-oiled machine. He loved to dance and would smoothly and elegantly lead me across the dance floor. He walked briskly and decisively, always with a bounce in his step. And up until the last nine months of his life, he golfed five to six days a week, speed-walking the 18 holes and carrying his bag, and he swam laps four mornings a week.

Maybe that's what made the lung cancer diagnosis such a surprise, so appalling – that his body would suddenly malfunction like that. Even while we knew the diagnosis and the likely course of the disease, his death came swiftly and was a shock. For reasons I don't fully understand, I felt a strong need to have my own keep-sake urn with some of his ashes. We interred most of his ashes in the Puget Sound in Washington state, just off my uncle's house on Orcas Island, but I needed to keep a part of him with me.

My keepsake urn is just a small personal urn, about three inches tall. While urn-shaped, it is about the size of a bottle of perfume. My daughter, Emma, was only six years old when he died and she was fascinated by the urn. One day, she asked if she could see inside. I paused and thought about it for a moment, then I said, "OK... but the ashes are loose in there so no touching...and no sneezing!" She agreed to these terms and I unscrewed the top and held down the open urn so she could see inside. Now, if you have ever seen cremated remains, then you know that it's not just ashes. There are bits... little pieces of something. Emma, taking this all very seriously, carefully peered inside the little urn for a while then looked up to me and asked, "What part is that?" What an excellent question! I looked at her and said, "I don't know, honey... perhaps his left elbow?"

The human body has many, many parts. The adult human body has 100 trillion cells, 206 bones, over 600 muscles, and 78 organs. It is also comprised of about 6 pounds of skin, along with ligaments, cartilage, veins, arteries, blood, fat, and more. Every time we take a step, reach for something, or take a breath, hundreds of different parts work together to accomplish what may seem like one single movement, one seamless, unified, concerted action of body and mind. The human body represents one of the most complex systems in existence.

Perhaps this is why the body is one of the most powerful images for the church in scripture. The metaphor conveys both complexity and organic unity – the many parts that, while different in function and feature, work together to produce a whole that is far greater than the sum of its parts. In our lesson from Paul's letter to the early church in Corinth, Paul speaks eloquently of the community of Christ, the church, as the very Body of Christ. He writes, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it... 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." As the human body is a whole comprised of many parts, all necessary in function and role, the Body of Christ is likewise a holy_unity within diversity.

Someone once said that we often confuse unity with uniformity, because it is much easier to gather with people who are like ourselves than it is to reach across the divisions which mark our culture. Paul, however, insists on something richer for our Christian communities. Since the church is intended to be a foretaste of the final reconciliation and harmony of all things that God promises, Paul calls the church to start acting that way now. When we recognize that this diversity is the gift of God's grace and a sign of the Spirit at work as Paul explains, we then see diversity and difference in the church not as a problem to be avoided or managed, but rather the ideal that we should embrace.

Paul contrasts this holy diversity of the church to the duality found in society. He writes, "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." In baptism, we are bound together into the Body of Christ and experience the Spirit of God at work to overcome the divisions present in our society. Paul mentions the culturally-divided pairs of Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, and even male and female, that are used as cultural discriminators. In our day and time, we can add quite a few others. Off the top of my head I can think of: young or old; gay or straight; Republican or Democrat; Cis- or trans-gender; lay or ordained. These dualistic categorizations – as well as many others – are operative every day in our society, labelling and imposing greater or lesser value,

but Paul preaches that is not the case in the Body of Christ. Through the church's shared experience of God's grace in baptism, Paul says we all share the same Spirit and the same promise, and thus are equally part of the same body. Moreover, the unity of the body is enriched and made more whole because of the diversity contained within.

The image of the body as a metaphor for communal life is not unique to Paul. Others in the Roman world – especially politicians and philosophers – used the same image. Most often however, this metaphor was used to reinforce the social hierarchy and power disparity of the status quo. The point most often made was that every body needs a head, and in society that was provided by the wealthy, the rulers, and the elite. Every body needs hands and feet to do the hard and dirty work, and that was provided in society by just about everyone else. Paul, while employing the very same image, uses it to illustrate something very different. His body imagery is an entirely new vision of equality – a deep unity of the whole body, in which the joys and sufferings of each part is shared by the whole.

God's intended harmony of Unity within Diversity within the Church requires neither the sublimation of self found in the conformity of codependence, nor the prioritization of self-interest found in radical independence. Christ's body is to be comprised of individual members, who retain their distinct identities, even as they find their greatest expression within the whole. God's intended state for our communal life is one of holy interdependence – we are individual selves living with each other.

The Rev. Dr. Samuel Wells, professor of Christian Ethics and Anglican priest, once preached that the most important word in scripture is "with." At the very beginning of all things, John's gospel says, "The Word was with God. He was in the beginning with God. Without him not one thing came into being." In other words, Dr. Wells said, "before anything else, there was a 'with.'" And that this "with" is "the most fundamental thing about God" – that it describes the very heart of God and the nature of God's purpose and destiny for us. This with-ness is found in our very account of creation, in our covenants between God and his people, in the very incarnation of Jesus as Emmanuel, or "God with us," and in Christ's promises for continued intimate relationship with us even after his departure. This with-ness is also found in our life in the Body of Christ, being bound together through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

What is important to note about this holy with-ness is how it is different than "for". "For" can be much easier, require much less from us. I can much more comfortably do something for someone who is different than me than to do something with another. Doing, being, loving "for" grants me the privilege of maintaining some safe and easy distance from the other person. "With," on the other hand, insists on intimacy and vulnerability from both parties. "With" knocks on the doors of our hearts and bids us to open ourselves to deep relationship, and risk the sufferings, discomforts, and joys of another. As Paul says, in the Body of Christ, "if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

In the Body of Christ, and within its particular expression here at The Church of the Good Shepherd, we are called to live with each other and with the varied neighbors of our community. This essential "with-ness" of our communal life reflects God's very image impressed deep within us. Being made in the image of God, we live most fully human lives when we maintain our individuality, each with our own distinct grace-filled gifts to share, and yet are bound to each other and knit by the Holy Spirit into a community of love that reflects a holy unity within diversity.

Amen.