

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10, Psalm 19, 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-31a, Luke 4:14-21

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (1 Cor. 12:27)

II

A couple of years ago, I was browsing around in a Jewish bookstore in Berkeley, and I found an interlinear psalter -- that's the Book of Psalms that's written in Hebrew, but it also has the English translation inserted between the lines. In the back of the book I was delighted to find that there was some additional material: a number of prayers together with a table of blessings. One of the blessings was intended to be used by rabbis when visiting persons who are sick. The blessing said, “May the blessing of God come upon you, and upon every one of your 275 organs.”

That's too many organs!

When I took high school physiology, we had to memorize all the organs, but I don't remember there being that many. Maybe the number has changed since then, I don't know.

Anyway, when Paul says that we are the Body of Christ, it seems logical to me that he doesn't mean just outward body parts, you know, like arms and legs, but also all of the body's parts, including the organs, because every one of the body's parts is needed to make the whole body function properly, right?

Well, let's have another look at some of what Paul says - “Indeed the body does not consist of one part 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 parts in the body, each one of them, just as God chose. If all were a single part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.”

This metaphor – all this body language – helps to remind us that when we talk about Incarnation, we are talking about enfleshment. When we say that the Word was made flesh, we're talking about the actual flesh-and-blood body of Jesus himself.

And when we say that we are the Body of Christ, we are talking about our actual bodies – flesh, blood, and bone, body odors and body fluids, and all of

that squishy, yucky stuff. We're talking about this marvelous, complex, physical, electro-chemical machines that God's Spirit has made us to be.

We are the Body of Christ, and each one of us is a highly specialized organ within that body. Yet, we often tend to doubt our worthiness as contributing members of the body, or even our worthiness as individuals. We tend to say, "Because I am not a spleen, I do not belong to the body," or, "Because I am not a corpus callosum, I can't possibly be worthy of membership in the body."

Actually, what we really say is, I'm too fat, or too thin, too hairy, or too bald; I'm not smart enough, not clever enough, not talented enough. Of what use could I possibly be?

But we know that there is no truth in that. God has created each one of us, each with our native abilities, talents, and qualities. And God has placed each one of us within this Body of Christ to function as a highly specialized organ within that body. Sometimes, what exactly that special function is may not be obvious to us. Also, that function may change during the course of our lives, maybe several times. Sometimes, our special function may be just to show up and be who we are, to be friends to our friends, to be there for one another in time of need, to pray for one another. Luther called this the mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers – although we would say the mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers and the sisters. But Luther ranked that simple human activity almost on the level of a sacrament, because it's so important for the building up of the Body of Christ.

III

Let's go back and have another look at Paul's words.

"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 parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.....God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the lesser part, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the parts may have the same care for one another."
(I Cor. 12:21-22, 24-25)

You'll notice that this section is slightly different from the one that went before. In the previous section the individual organs were doubting themselves ("If the foot were to say, 'because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body'"). But in this section, some organs are lording it over other organs, telling them, "I have no need of you."

This is because Paul knew that, within the Corinthian congregation, there was a division between some who were quite well off financially, and also well connected socially and politically, and others who were not well connected at all, and also did not have much money. Dissension had arisen between these groups. The more affluent group tended to lord it over the less affluent group, and the less affluent group tended to feel that they were less valued and that they had less of value to offer to the congregation.

One way that Paul deals with this problem is by using the imagery of the Body of Christ in the first place. It was common in antiquity to use the metaphor of the body, in order to describe the "body politic," for example. But the metaphor was almost always used in order to show why the lesser parts of the body ought to remain lesser.

But Paul turns the metaphor on its head. In the Body of Christ, not only are the weaker parts indispensable, not only does the greater honor go to the lesser part, but this is actually the way God has arranged the body! It's not just the natural order of things. God wants it that way and, for those who want to live their lives in Christ, that's the way it's going to be!

Another argument that Paul uses is to make it clear that the origin of the Body of Christ is to be found in Holy Baptism. "For in the one Spirit," he says, "we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." (I Cor. 12:13)

Paul is making it clear that baptism is the great leveler for Christians. It doesn't matter who you are, what your ethnicity is, what your social status is, how much money you have or don't have – in baptism we all pass through the same water and end up as part of the same Body of Christ together with all others who have also been baptized. And, he says, it's the Holy Spirit who does all this. We can't even boast about bringing ourselves to the font. The business end of baptism is accomplished by the Spirit, and only the Spirit.

IV

All of this, says Paul, is so that the members – the members of the body, and the members of the church – "...may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honored, all rejoice together." (I Cor. 12:25-26)

Within the Christian communion, the Body of Christ, we reach in to Christ, who is our unity, and we reach out to one another in love and care, for Christ has made us one. We tend to one another in tenderhearted devotion, comforting and helping one another in times of loss or sorrow or difficulty, and joining together in celebration in times of joy.

And this movement, this reaching out, does not take place only within our little corner of the church. We extend the caring heart and the helping hand all around the world, and not only within the Christian church, either.

During these past days, we have all been moved to tears by the horrible images of suffering that have been coming back to us from the devastating earthquake in Haiti. Together we have wept and prayed and sent assistance for the relief of the Haitian people, and will continue to do so in the months to come. It has not been necessary to urge us to do these things for our brothers and sisters in Haiti. We are the Body of Christ. It's what we do.

V

In a few minutes we will gather once again around the table of the Lord to celebrate the sacrament of our unity in Christ, and to give thanks for the many graces and blessings that we have been given in his name.

In another place in I Corinthians, Paul writes, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."
(I Cor. 10: 16-17)

Let us come to the Eucharist together in joy and in peace. AMEN.