

BODY PARTS

I Corinthians 12:12-31

Have you ever taken something apart for a repair, fixed the problem, then proceed to put said item back together only to discover you have parts leftover? What do you do? Do you take the item apart hoping to find where the extra pieces belong, or do you say a quick prayer hoping the extra thingamabob, or thingamajig are not essential to the successful operation of the item? I can't speak for anyone else, but unless I recognize the leftover pieces, I tend to say the quick prayer hoping the missing parts are non-essential – sort of like our appendix or spleen!!

There are those rare mechanically minded persons, however, who never have this problem. Our late nephew, Marc von Trapp was in awe of our son Matthew's ability to be one of these people. He once told his mom, "Matt is the only person I know who can take something apart and put it back together without having any leftover parts! Did this mean Marc was any less gifted than Matthew? Absolutely not. Just as our passage from I Corinthians indicates, Marc and Matt simply had different but much needed gifts.

In today's epistle reading, the apostle Paul uses the parts of the body as an illustration for what it means to be the church. He, too, is looking for ways each part of the body will function best. The text is a portion of Paul's letter to a church in the city of Corinth. Like every church, then and now, it was made up of people with varying gifts. Some had gifts for preaching and teaching. Others were gifted in mission and service. Some were gifted with great business sense and were good at generating wealth. Others had the gift of caring for the home, family and one another. Rather than seeing those differences as a blessing, the Corinthian church wondered which gifts were better than others. They were bickering about position and status. They were vying for power within the group. (Homiletics, January 24, 2016).

We know this issue all too well. It happens in just about every organization, including churches. We expect others to be just like us, and we want our unique giftedness to be appreciated and to bring us acclaim. One of the reasons team sports are so important for children is the lessons in teamwork and cooperation. Oftentimes, though, the kids playing ball seem to have a better grip of the concept of teamwork than their parents; understanding teamwork, cooperation, and working for the common good.

The kids, 8 to 11 years old, are playing baseball, and the coach is getting frustrated. At one point during a game, he says to one of his young players, "Do you understand what *cooperation* is? What a *team* is?" The little boy nods in the affirmative. "Do you understand that what matters is not whether we win or lose, but that we do it *together as a team*?" Once again, the kid nods. Yes, he understands. "So," the coach continues, "when a strike is called, or you're out at first, you don't argue or curse or attack the umpire. Do you understand all that?" Again, the little boy nods. "Good," says the coach. "Now go over there and explain it to your mother."

Back to the church at Corinth. From the way Paul's letter unfolds, we can easily assume that what we read in 1 Corinthians is Paul's response to a question from the church which had asked him to settle a dispute. Perhaps they asked him which role in the church was most important. Rather than ranking the gifts of the Spirit, Paul gives an illustration, comparing each member of the church to the members of a body. A group of believers, he says, is greater than the sum of its parts. We are not a homogenous group, but a group of different parts assembled by God to represent Christ to the greater community. The food pantry and outreach ministries of Marquis certainly meet this criteria.

I think I heard mention made of a "tree of warmth" where the articles donated are made available to the patrons of the food pantry? I was thrilled to hear this. Unbeknownst probably to most of you, I love to knit...hats in particular. Sadly, I seem unable to interest my family members or friends in my finished product!! I don't think I make ugly hats!! Although they do tend to end up being a bit on the large side!! This morning I brought in a few of my finished product and I will let you decide!! I certainly know Vern would much rather see me knit than play with my phone!!

On the surface, it may appear as though most churches are a loose collection of people united by geography. We all come to the same church every Sunday because it is near our homes. Or, we may drive by a local church, in favor of a distant church because we like the pastor better, or they have better coffee during Fellowship Hour. We attend a Sunday school class or small group, and maybe help with the youth group or join a committee. For the most part, we think, it stops there. We can get involved as much, or as little, as we like. Please keep in mind I am not describing Marquis. This is more of a generic scenario many churches experience and is more indicative of people looking for the perfect church to meet their needs. Does such a church even exist??

Too often what happens is when the church no longer meeting their needs, or when persons begin to disagree with statements the church or the pastor has made, one can simply stop attending and withdraw or transfer their membership to some other church. It is very easy to simply detach from one body and join another if it is a better fit. Sometimes, and maybe this is what was happening in Corinth, there are circumstances where long time church members find that there are those in the church who don't quite fit. Perhaps, they have a minority opinion or gifts and interests that are vastly different than most of the other members of the church. I have actually experienced this as a pastor particularly in one appointment. In this place, the word was going around that "She does not fit in here. She is not adapting to our ways!!" (I was in my 6th year!) My reaction when I heard this was, "And I won't be adapting anytime soon!" I believe my function as a pastor in any appointment is to direct my congregations to adapt to Jesus' way! Especially if the ways and or traditions of any church may run contrary to the words of Micah 6:8 (CEV): *The Lord God has told us what is right and what he demands: "See that justice is done, let mercy be your first concern, and humbly obey your God."* Or, if you prefer the King James Version: *He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?* Or churches who fail to follow the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, particularly these words from Matthew 25:32-36: *When the Son of Man comes in his glory with all of his angels, he will sit on his royal throne. The people of all*

nations will be brought before him, and he will separate them, as shepherds separate their sheep from their goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, "My father has blessed you! Come and receive the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world was created. When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat, and when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me, and when I was naked, you gave me clothes to wear. When I was sick, you took care of me, and when I was in jail, you visited me. Oh my!! Looking back, I guess it is obvious that particular comment certainly plucked my last nerve and got my dander up! I do believe, however, that if I ever hear the same comment again, my reaction would be much the same! I once heard a fellow seminarian say, I preach to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable!! Now, that will preach!

Church membership or affiliation is not a responsibility we ought to take lightly. It is different from a book club or a gym membership. We don't just show up to have our needs met. Church membership is also not like a loyalty card at the local grocery store. We don't join just to receive frequent worship blessings. We are not stockholders whose time of service and financial investment necessarily give us a say in setting the direction of the church's future. Today's reading demands a deeper commitment from each of us. (Homiletics, 2016).

Body Parts... In 1 Corinthians 12, the Bible teaches us that our connection to one another in Christ is so much more. We are eyes, ears, feet and hands. We are part of the body of Christ. We are dependent upon one another, and we function best when we realize that despite our differences, we all work together toward the same goal. Our differences are not to be minimized but celebrated. Each of us brings varying gifts to the body of Christ which makes each of us, and our gifts, necessary to fulfill the work of the whole body in the world. Some of us may be talkers, and others thinkers. Some of us are planners, and others doers. Some of us find energy while reaching out to the poor and needy, and others when ministering to the children through Sunday school and our youth programs. Some are excited about the music and preaching that draw people to us on a Sunday morning, while others call us to go outside of our walls to love those who feel shut out. We think differently. We are different. And that is okay. This is God's design for us. God has assembled us into the body just how God wants it. Our task is to work together to serve Christ in all that we do.

I believe this with every fiber of my being. I am not a womb Methodist – the term I have learned indicates persons born a Methodist, raised a Methodist (for those pre-dating the Evangelical United Brethren – Methodist merger into today's United Methodist Church)... and eventually buried a United Methodist! I chose to be a United Methodist because of John Wesley's theology of Grace and living out of this grace among the least the last and the lost.

Next month there is a special called General Conference convening in St. Louis, MO which will attempt to bring resolution to the ongoing church "battle" over sexuality facing our denomination. I have addressed this more fully in the February newsletter, please take the time to read what I have written. You will see that I have some strong feelings regarding this whole issue. You will

also note that I have chosen not to make this the central focus of our ministry together. We have far bigger needs among our members and in our surrounding community.

In closing I want to share with you a story from my family history. It happened at the time my Papa, his siblings, his Father and Stepmother Maria escaped the clutches of Hitler by leaving on a train to Italy under the legitimate guise of going on a concert tour. Only, this time, with only the clothes on their back, they were leaving everything they loved behind, knowing they would not be returning any time soon. My Grandfather never returned to the country he loved.

Somehow in the rush of leaving my Aunt Lorli, still a young child managed to forget her favorite stuffed animal behind. She was inconsolable. My Grandmother Maria, a gifted story teller, began to tell her the story of another child who had to escape evil by fleeing to Egypt in the middle of the night. She told Lorli about the evil King Herod seeking to kill the Baby Jesus by killing all the male Jewish babies under the age of 2. Lorli's sobs softened to hiccups and soon she was mesmerized by Mutter's story. She compared their need to flee Austria because of the evils of Hitler and the Nazi's to the flight of the Christ child to safety in Egypt. She said, "There will always be someone trying to kill the Christ child. There will always be Herod's trying to destroy the Good News of Jesus Christ." Their names will be different...Hitler, Himmler, Mussolini... You and I might know them as Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, or Religious extremists, but they are still trying to destroy God's love.

What are the things distracting us from being Christ to the world? Are we allowing ourselves to be side tracked by fake news reports and actual news reports? Are we becoming so caught up in the political furor bombarding us that we fail to see the needs of our neighbors? Are we so fixated on being "right" that we forget to be kind? Are our hearts disturbed with the current state of the lack of common decency and respect for others? I hope so. Bullying and ethnic intolerance have reached new heights. Pointing a blaming finger and unleashed anger seems to be the norm. All those body parts are looking for answers in all the wrong places.

Friends look to your hearts. Look to the words of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ in his reply to the unnamed Pharisee in Matthew 22:35–40 and Mark 12:28–34: *And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.*

At the end of each day, I invite you to look in the mirror and ask yourself, "Where did I bring the love of Christ into my world today?" And... "When I am asked by the Great Shepherd if I fed His lambs, tended His sheep, and fed His sheep?" (John 21:15-17) just what will my answer be? Because, in the final analysis, this is all that matters! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.