

Last Sunday on Pentecost, we discussed the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Christian Church. This morning let's discuss our role and responsibility as members of this Church. In his letters as recorded in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul provides advice and guidance to the young struggling churches that he had established on his missionary trips. One of these was the new church at Corinth which was trying to figure out how to live as Christians in the Greek world. In addressing their problems in our text for this morning, Paul provides one of the most beautiful pictures of the unity of the Church ever written. Let's see how Paul describes a unified church in the twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians, verses 12 through 31.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

A few minutes before the services started, the congregation were sitting in their pews talking. Suddenly, the devil appeared in the front of the church. Everybody started screaming and running for the exit to get away from the evil one. Soon everybody had exited except one elderly gentleman who sat calmly in his pew. The devil walked up to him and said: "Don't you know who I am?" To which the man replied: "Yep, sure do." "Aren't you afraid of me" the devil said. "Nope, I'm not," said the man. "Don't you realize that I can kill you with one word," asked the devil. "Don't doubt it for a minute," replied the man. "Don't you know I can cause you horrifying pain for eternity," said the devil. "Yep" was the calm reply. "And you are still not afraid," asked the devil. "Nope." Finally, the devil asked the old man: "Well, why aren't you afraid of me?" To which the man replied: "Because I have been married to your sister for 48 years!"

In this text, Paul uses the human body to describe how a church should function. Our bodies consist of many parts, and our overall health depends on all of them working together. Paul tells the Corinthians and us today: "You are the body of Christ." Think about what Paul is saying here. Jesus has gone back to heaven and is no longer physically here on earth. Therefore, if He wants something done, He has to find somebody to do it. If He wants a child taught, He has to find a teacher to teach. If He wants a sick person cured, He has to find a doctor or nurse to do His work. If He wants a story told, He has to find someone to tell it.

Thus, we are called to be the body of Christ to this world; hands to do His work; feet to run His errands; and a voice to speak for Him. Just as the human body is a vehicle by which a person expresses himself to others, so the body of Christ is the vehicle by which Jesus chooses to make Himself known to the world. When you really stop and think about it, this is an awesome responsibility and honor for us as believers in Jesus Christ. As Paul states in 2 Corinthians 5:20, we are Christ's ambassadors to the world. We are to show the world who Jesus Christ is by our thoughts, words and actions, by how we live our daily lives.

As we all know from experience, the body is healthy and efficient only when each part is functioning as designed. The different parts of the body are not jealous of each other, and do not covet each other's function. According to Paul, certain things should exist in the Church, the body of Christ. First, we should realize that we need each other. Too often people in church become so engrossed in their work and so convinced of its importance that they neglect or even criticize others who have chosen to do other work. If the Church is to be a healthy body, we need to appreciate each other's role in the church.

Second, we need to respect each other. Romans 12: 16 states: "Consider everyone as equal, and don't think that you're better than anyone else." In the body, every part is important. If any limb or organ ceases to function properly, the whole body suffers; as many of us who are getting on in years can testify to. There was a woman who decided to get in better shape. After getting her doctor's permission, she joined a fitness club and signed up for an aerobics class for seniors. She said that she bent, twisted, jumped up and down and perspired for an hour. But, by the time she got her leotards on the class was over. Many of us can relate to this.

As Christians we are to respect others; no matter who they are, where they came from or what their role in the church is. We have all been in churches where someone thought and acted like they were better than everybody else due to their job, education, wealth, position in the church, and even appearance. This always disrupts the harmony of the church and hinders its ability to serve God.

Next, we need to sympathize with each other. If you fell and severely injured your wrist, it would swell up and become painful. The rest of the body would feel this pain and be impacted by it. In the same way, as a band of brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ we should rejoice together and cry together; we are to share each other's joys and concerns. This is one of the joys and benefits of belonging to a church that unfortunately the rest of the world is not aware of, and one that they are constantly searching for; a place to belong, a place to call home, a place where you are cared for and loved!

In the human body, there are nerve cells, blood cells, and many other cells each having a distinct function. The body operates smoothly, not because the cells get together and vote on what to do, but because each one does what it is designed to do. It is the responsibility of the brain to coordinate all these functions, so that the body operates properly with each cell fulfilling its purpose. Now think what would happen if the cells chose to go their own way? Do you know what we call a rebellion of the cells? Cancer! Any time the cells in your body don't operate properly, it means that the body is sick; that something is wrong with it.

Many of the problems of the church today are the result of us forgetting that the church is a body with Jesus Christ as its head. Instead, we sometimes try to operate the church as a

business, seeking our own agenda and not God's will. We fail to maintain contact with God; seeking our will, not His; we neglect our prayer life. Paul reminds us that as the Church we must focus on our head, Jesus Christ; we must give Him control! To be the body of Christ is to live a life of obedience to God. God gives us our place in the body, and we are called to do our best no matter what our role in the body is: each of us has a responsibility to the church and the Lord.

While using the human body to illustrate how the body of Christ is to function, Paul drives home an essential point. The human body is an amazing creation of God. Have you ever really thought about the creativity and ingenuity that went into designing your body? How when properly maintained and healthy, everything functions perfectly? Each member has a specific function that works in unison with the other members to keep the body functioning properly. In verse 18, Paul acknowledges that God has arranged the parts of the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be. There are no unimportant parts of the body; all serve a useful and definite function in providing life.

Just as God created the human body, so He has created the Church for a purpose – His purpose. As members of the church, Christians are empowered by God to perform specific tasks in building His kingdom. Paul tells us that as believers we are all baptized by the Holy Spirit. And this same Spirit has given each one of us spiritual gifts to be used in service to the Lord. Earlier in the twelfth chapter, verses 4-6 and 11, Paul tells us: "There are different gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of services but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. All these are the works of one and the same Spirit, and He gives them to each one, just as He determines."

Note what Paul is saying here; there are different gifts but all working for the same purpose, the service of God. In addition to identifying the different types of spiritual gifts in this chapter, Paul also lists other spiritual gifts in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4. One scholar has identified twenty different spiritual gifts. Believe it or not, we each have spiritual gifts; the number and type will vary depending on the Holy Spirit. The type of gifts available in each church varies according to the needs of the church and what God wants them to do. Having been involved in the church for over seventy years and having served four different churches, I am constantly amazed how whenever a need arises, God always provides someone or a group of people with the necessary gifts to carry out His purpose.

But these spiritual gifts are not meant to be put on a shelf and brought out only for special occasions. God gave them to us to be used. Like the muscles in our bodies, we are to develop our spiritual gifts by using them, exercising them each and every day. Each one of us has a role and purpose in the Church, and God wants us to find where we fit in and where our gifts can be used to build His kingdom. He wants us to exercise our spiritual muscles.

Maybe you are one of those people who makes a New Year's resolution to get into better shape each year. Now if you are serious about this, you know that it requires a definite commitment. It's like a father who was skeptical of his teenage son's newfound determination to build up his muscles. Well dad and his son went to a sporting goods store to check out the latest weight-lifting equipment. The teenager pleaded with his father: "Please, dad, I'll promise to use them every day." "I don't know, Michael. It's a really big commitment on your part," his father replied. "Please, dad!" "But Michael, they're not cheap; this is a big investment," his dad said. "But dad; I'll use them every day, I promise. You'll see." Finally won over, the father paid for the equipment and headed for the door. After a few steps, he heard his son behind him calling out: "What! You mean I have to carry them to the car?" Believe it or not, our Heavenly Father expects each of us to carry our weight in building His kingdom here in Rio Rancho.

Someone once called a preacher to say that he wanted to join his church. Then he went on to explain that he did not want to attend church every Sunday, study the Bible, visit the sick, do mission work or serve as a teacher or leader. The minister commended him for his decision to become a church member, but told him that the church he was looking for was located in another part of town. The man took down the directions. When he arrived at the address that the preacher had given him, he came face to face with what his lack of commitment meant. There stood an abandoned church building boarded up and ready for demolition.

Without all parts of the body functioning properly, doing their part, the body soon dies or becomes disabled. The same is true for any church. Without each person using their God given gifts in service and doing their part, the church soon dies and becomes a vacant building. Several years ago, Judy and I took a trip to Sun Valley, Idaho, and Yellowstone National Park. As we drove through the small towns, I kept seeing church buildings that had been turned into gift shops, museums, and coffee shops. I kept wondering what happened? Why did the church close? It's a sad commentary when churches go out of business because of lack of participation and commitment. The world at its worst needs the church at its best, especially now.

Nestled in the Alps in Switzerland is a small out-of-the-way village with a castle and a church constructed out of large stones. The village can only be reached by climbing worn steps on the side of the mountain. The peculiar thing about this particular church is that it has no interior lighting. One evening a traveler to the village heard the church bell ringing, and saw people coming down the narrow streets, each carrying a small bronze lamp. She approached one worshipper and said: "Please, I'm a stranger here. Can you tell me why everybody is carrying a lamp to church?"

The woman replied: "Why, yes, I would be happy to. Years ago, a duke lived in the castle up there. He built the church, endowed it, and asked that each worshipper bring his own lamp."

To which the traveler replied: "I would think that would keep people from attending the evening services."

"Oh, no, it works the other way," the woman said. "It is called the Church of the Lighted Lamps. Everybody that goes there makes it a little brighter and when anybody is tempted to stay at home or go somewhere else, they just remember that the dear old church needs everybody's lamp, and if your lamp isn't there, there is so much less light."

The same is true for this church and every one of God's churches. In the fifth chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells us that we are to be the light of the world, and we are not to hide our light, but let it shine for the glory of God. God needs each and every one of our lamps, our spiritual gifts, and our service to make this world a better place to live. We are called to be His Church and His light to this world. Don't let your lamp be missing. We need everybody's lamp. May you find your role in this church; may you use the spiritual gifts God has given you; and may your light shine as bright as it can for the Lord. Amen