

Sermon ✝ January 23, 2022
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Frank Maxwell

It's gotta be one of my favorite church cartoons. The picture is of a church council sitting around a large table. And the president of the council is reading the results of a vote, "*then it's passed by a 7-5 vote...that from now on we'll announce all decisions as unanimous.*"

As we are almost forced to laugh at ourselves... it is the kind of humor which can also make us stop and think. It is good to sometimes be introspective. Perhaps we don't do enough of that as a congregation . . . so on this day of our annual meeting . . . let's do it.

In his first letter to the congregation at Corinth, Saint Paul is forcing the members of his flock to do a little introspection of their own. Using the common Greek analogy of the human body, Paul invites his people to consider both their diversity and that which binds them together.

We, too, are a part of this body. We call it the *body of Christ*. I know you have heard the term before . . . but what precisely do we mean when we refer to ourselves as the *body of Christ*?

For one thing, we mean that our witness as Christians is not only an individual witness, but also a corporate witness.

We have a responsibility to live out our faith in personal ways . . . but because we are part of a body . . . we also have a collective testimony to bear. There seems to be a great deal of misunderstanding about this.

Many people take the position that one's witness as a Christian is a totally individual matter. Others discount the individual witness and say that only collectively can the church bear witness to its mission.

The truth is that both kinds of witness are necessary . . . either one without the other is false. Every individual Christian has the responsibility to bear a witness that is both individual and corporate.

"We are in Christ," as one author put it, *"not as a pebble in a box, but as a branch on a tree."*

The Corinthian church was at least as diversified as any congregation today. It was basically composed of the poorer and humbler sections of the community (servants . . . slaves). But there were also some well-to-do folks.

And I'm sure that there were the usual kinds of petty fights that so many congregations get involved in. And so it was that Paul stressed . . . "*we were all baptized into one body.*"

One of the main functions of a worship service is to lift us out of ourselves and into a community of love and fellowship.

More important than our differences as individuals is our oneness of faith. The purpose which we share as a congregation is that Christ's role of love be supreme in our community and our world.

When we speak of the church as the *body of Christ*, we also imply that the church as a whole is sensitive to pain in any one of its parts. Plato once pointed out that we do not say, "*my finger has a pain*"; we say, "*I have a pain*."

Within each one of us, there is a personality and it gives unity to all of the various parts of our body. So every and any irritation, however small, is registered at the center of our being.

The church as the body of Christ, is marked by this same kind of sensitivity. Hurt and suffering in any one of its members . . . is felt by all of its members.

That what the hymn, *Blest Be the Tie that Binds* is all about . . .

*"We share our mutual woes,
our mutual burdens bear,
and often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear."*

Within a given congregation, this is more than mere sentiment. When there is a death, we all know of it . . . we weep because of our common loss. When one of our number is ill, we pray for their recovery. It is all part of the sensitivity inherent in the body of Christ.

And while it is good to have a loyalty for our own congregation . . . we need to take care lest we become too provincial. Our sensitivity to others must extend beyond the walls of this building.

It is our duty and mission to be concerned and pray for our sisters and brothers. Wherever there is hurting within the body of Christ, it is felt by the entire body.

We now come to the question: "*How?*" *How can we do this . . . how does St. Luke's fit into all of this?*

First of all, we are in this thing together. It is our church, right? No! It is Christ's church.

And we all have an equal share in this ministry. We need to continually work at affirming the special gifts and talents that all bring to our mission.

One of my favorite Peanuts cartoon . . . the children lying on the grass and watching the clouds floating through a blue summer sky. One by one, they share what they think the clouds look like. Lucy says that the clouds remind her of an intricate map of a coastal archipelago. Linus sees in one cloud a formation of the crowd at the stoning of St. Stephen. Then Charlie Brown meekly indicates that he saw something which looked like a kitty and a ducky . . . but he thought he'd keep it to himself.

Those with great gifts can often intimidate those with smaller gifts. The body is composed of dissimilar parts . . . but such diversity is valid.

St. Luke's is poised on the verge of some very exciting possibilities. We are a congregation in transition. We are evaluating our ministry and purpose and mission. And we entreat the Holy Spirit to assist us and guide us in this process.

We also need to consider ways to expand our mission and impact in this community. And . . . as exciting and challenging and scary as all of this is . . . we must take care so that we do not just get wrapped up in ourselves.

If we, as a church, are only concerned for our members, then we have lost our purpose. We are here for our own benefit, of course, but only so that we can be equipped for greater service.

The church as the *body of Christ* . . . knows that its life is given to it that it may share that life with others.

As members of that body . . . we recognize that our witness as Christians is both personal and corporate.

May we take good care of our body.

May we bring good tidings to the afflicted.

May we bind up the brokenhearted.

May we proclaim liberty to the captives.

May we proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Amen.