

“The Body of Christ”
1 Corinthians 12:12-31
Andrew Foster Connors
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 7, 2016

If “diversity” had been a buzzword in the Apostle Paul’s day, then Corinth would have set the definition. Corinth had everything. Temples, Greek and Egyptian shrines, Jewish synagogues and the Roman imperial cult. Corinth had a reputation for having wealth without culture, a sort of Sin City with everything to offer. Corinth’s diversity was not exactly an accident. In 44 BC Julius Caesar repopulated the city of Corinth with retired military and freed persons from an increasingly overpopulated Rome. I can imagine that people lived there liked their city’s reputation. They appreciated the diversity, appreciated the variety, appreciated people’s different backgrounds.¹

But like any city, diversity also comes with its share of challenges and Corinth was no different. The church had a lot of conflict which is why Paul wrote so much about unity and love and getting along in this letter. Church members were suing each other in court, some were eating meat sacrificed to idols leading to disputes about the limits of acceptable Christian behavior in a pluralistic world. And some of the wealthy members of the congregation were showing up to worship early and eating all the communion food before the working people have a chance to get there.

Paul discovered quickly that diversity isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, not when it’s real, not when it’s more than ornamentation. Diversity means difference, and difference is the breeding grounds for conflict that happens when people with different backgrounds, experiences, races, and economic situations all come together to try to be church.

Try to be church isn’t actually the right way to say it. I know that’s what most of us really think in this world of choice. When we look for a church we talk about *shopping* for one. When people leave a church they say things like “it wasn’t *meeting my needs*.” We talk about church as something we decide to be a part of, and more broadly, something that human beings create. But Paul says, the church is the result of the Spirit. And once the Spirit gets her hands on you, you’re part of the body whether you want to be or not. You’re part of the living, breathing body of Christ in the world.

Body talk is admittedly odd talk. At least, today’s church seems to treat it that way. When most of us think about “membership” we think about joining the gym, the university club, Costco, American Express. But Paul was talking about part of the body. “There are many members, but one body,” he says. Everybody has their place: Jews or Greeks, slaves or free. Membership is rooted in the body, not in some kind of club where

¹ I appreciate the scholarship of my friend, the Rev. Elizabeth Goodrich, whose work on this passage informed some of this sermon.

you pay to enter, but as a body that you become a part of – a living, breathing, organism, that functions best when all its members understand that they all have a part to play.

And in an era when people are despairing or rejoicing about the decline of the institution of the church, maybe it's a refreshing thing to be reminded that the early church never thought of itself that way – not as an institution, but as a body, an organism, whose life is nurtured by the connections between its members. Not as a not-for-profit, or a business, or even a community, but a body - people connected to one another not by choice, but by necessity, an interconnected reality.

It's a beautiful image but until you go back and see where Paul probably took it from. He pulled it from Livy, the Roman historian, in a story he told in his *History of Rome*, written 60-75 years before Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

Livy told the story of the first secession of plebs in 494 BC. The plebs were the majority of the Roman population, yet with almost no power. The patricians had all the power.² After lots of tension around debt and other issues, the plebs organized together and decided to travel 3 miles outside the city of Rome to protest inaction by the Senate which was controlled entirely by the patricians. Since the patricians relied on the plebs not only for their labor and tax dollars but also to serve in the armies that protected their city, the coordinated protest put the entire city at risk. This was class warfare in pre-democratic days. A big game of chicken – who would give in, first, the plebs or the patricians? Fearing the worst, the patricians decided to choose someone to negotiate a compromise.

They selected Menenius Agrippa – Livy calls him an “eloquent man” who was acceptable to the plebs because he himself was of plebian origin. Menenius told them a fable about a human body. How at one time all the parts of the body didn't get along as well as they do now. Some parts of the body got tired of seeing the stomach get everything that they worked hard to achieve and so they conspired together. “The hands were not to bring food to the mouth, the mouth was not to accept it when offered, the teeth were not to masticate it.” He told them this fable, Livy wrote condescendingly, “in primitive and uncouth fashion,” which Livy seemed to assume is the way the plebs liked to hear their stories. While trying to starve the body, Menenius explained, all the members of the body wasted away. Driving his point home, Menenius told his audience that the members of the body soon learned that the belly actually served the whole body, that most of the food it consumed was sent to the rest of the body through blood in the veins.³ According to Livy, Menenius' argument worked and the plebs returned to Rome.⁴

Menenius used the body to assert the power of the patricians over and against the plebs. And maybe Paul is doing the same. I mean that's one way you could read this letter. Not everyone gets to be a “respectable member” of the body, as Paul names it.

² If you've ever wondered why the incoming freshmen of the Naval Academy are called “plebes,” now you know.

³ “rendered no idle service, and the nourishment it received was no greater than that which it bestowed by returning to all parts of the body this blood by which we live and are strong, equally distributed into the veins, and after being matured by the digestion of the food,” Livy, *History of Rome*, Book 2, 2.32, begun in 27/25 BCE.

⁴ Ibid.

Somebody has to be more inferior. You can't have a body if everybody gets to be the head with no hands or feet.

Reading Livy's account in Bible study recently, one of our members said they didn't like Paul's letter to the Corinthians as much as they used to. Maybe Paul is just another Menenius using the metaphor of the body to keep the poor church members happy with being poor, to keep the slave members of the church happy being slaves, to keep everyone happy with their place. Paul's letter has certainly be read that way before.

But Paul's use of the body metaphor can also be read as a reaction against the imperial ordering of his day. The church is not just any body, but the body of Christ, no one member better than another. In fact, those that we *think* less honorable, he says, we clothe with greater honor. People are defined not by their own status, accomplishments or pedigree but in relationship to their brothers and sisters in Christ – not people they have chosen to be in the group, but the people God has chosen to bring together.

So rather than simply assert that I know what Paul meant to say when he wrote this letter, I'd like us to notice this morning that it's possible to read Paul's letter in two, opposing ways –to reinforce divisions or to radically revolutionize them. To reinforce what H. Richard Niebuhr critiqued in 1929 as “caste-organizations” of the church divided along race, class and nationality, or to overthrow them in favor of something much more human and holy, but harder to achieve.⁵

I want us to notice the possibilities so we all understand that the church has to make choices about who we want to be in the midst of our own diverse city. We have to decide what kind of body we've been called to be. We have to decide whether to pursue unity through well defined boundaries and place, and like-minded thought or through more unpredictable diversity of all kinds. We have to make choices.

In some ways I think we've already made the choice. We made the choice back in the '50s when we opened up the 2nd racially integrated preschool in the city – what become the Bolton Hill Nursery School. We made the choice when we marched and sat in for racial integration in the '60s. We made the choice when we became a More Light Church proclaiming that the Spirit does call queer people to be part of the body of Christ. We make the choice everytime we try a different style of worship, a different genre of music, a different way to organize ourselves. Every time we talk about greater accessibility, hospitality, mission we're making the choice to trust that the body of Christ is capable of handling all of our difference.

Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent and usually we get the Transfiguration story from one of the Gospels. We go up on the mountain with a couple of disciples and look on the glorified body of Christ which gives us strength, the thinking goes, to endure 40 days of spiritual focus in the wilderness as we prepare for Easter. But the snow threw us off this year, and we chose to do something different. Or maybe choice isn't the right word to use. Maybe the Spirit wanted us to look at the body of Christ from a different

⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 1929, p. 21, quoted in an excellent blog post by Peter J. Leithart on *First Things*, <http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/leithart/2015/06/social-sources-of-denominationalism>.

angle – the body that includes people from east and west and north and south. The body that includes all of our difference. The odd body that holds all of our diversity. Maybe God wants us to that the body of Christ that sustains us in the wilderness is the very diversity that so many still believe is tearing us apart. The body of Christ – living, breathing body – where all God’s children have a part to play.