

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Epiphany 3C + January 30, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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The Body of Christ

The Word of the Lord from 1 Corinthians 12:26: "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

The Church is the body of Christ. That's the analogy that Paul uses in I Corinthians 12, and there's some mystery here as well. Christ, after all, has a body of His own: that's the mystery of the Incarnation, that the Son of God was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. God the Father and Son are one, along with the Holy Spirit: yet while Father and Spirit are spirit alone, the Son has a body. He gets a body – becomes flesh – to be the Savior, to have a body that can be nailed to a cross, to have blood that can be shed for your sins. Jesus has a body: it's not that He's lacking one and needs to make use of yours. He was perfectly complete without a body, and now He has His own for eternity.

By having a body, Jesus saves you, saves your body. He also honors your body: good thing, too, because properly honoring your body doesn't come so easy for you. Bodies make for popular idols in one of a couple different ways. On the one hand, there's the temptation to vanity, to idolize this or that part of the body as what makes you better than everybody else: thus, if we want stereotypes, a woman might consider herself superior because of her beauty, or a man because of the size of his biceps. Vanity is such empty idolatry, because neither strength nor beauty last in this world, so the false god of the body always lets its worshiper die in the end.

On the other hand, there's the temptation to treat the body with contempt, to focus on those parts that are disappointing in form and function. I remember a brief news report of a supermodel who makes millions for her beauty, yet is focused on how ugly she considers her toes to be. If you're not tempted towards vanity, then you're tempted towards contempt – to be unhappy with the body God has given you because of faults, parts that don't work so well or the parts you've let go. This is a dangerous sin, too, because it leads you to blame God for giving you a bad body; that's far from the truth that God has given you a body that is able to sustain life despite the killing nature of sin; and it's far from recognizing that imperfections and afflictions are the curse of sin, not the carelessness of God. It's a dangerous sin because it leads you to mistreat your body rather than seek to preserve it; and it makes you think of the body as a prison from which you need to escape, rather than a creation that Jesus became flesh to redeem.

So the body makes a bad idol, yet nearly everyone is guilty of this idolatry. It's rare to find people who suffer neither vanity nor contempt about their bodies; being very skilled at sin, most people tend to suffer both at the same time.

And if sinners are going to be like that about their own bodies, then they're going to be like that about the body of Christ. It is true at the cross, where He is mocked for the weakness, the kill-ability of His body, even though He freely gives it over to death as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. It is true in the Lord's Supper (as Paul has just warned only a chapter before this one), where sinners either deny that Christ's body is even there or else consider His presence to be a little thing. And it is true when sinners look upon the body of Christ, the Church.

The body of Christ called the Church is made up of the people of God from all nations: Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, male and female, young and old. They are each different and unique, with an

array of appearances, gifts and talents. They are thus created and gathered together by God so that they might serve one another in the body of Christ; but at the same time, all those differences can lead to those same sins of vanity and contempt. Sinners want to be top dog, so they use their differences to say, "We might all be one in Christ, but I'm better than you."

This often happens with vain, worldly things, where Christians feel superior and more blessed because of a newer car, prettier face or higher level of fitness. It also happens with the gifts and blessings that God bestows for the Christian faith. Remember last week's epistle, where Paul listed a variety of gifts that God gives? That text leads right into this one: God gives a wide variety of gifts, services and activities to various Christians so that they might serve Him by serving one another within the body of Christ. God gives them to foster the unity of the body, because we are one in Christ. We are His body, for we have been baptized into His body. There will be differences and distinctions in the world – like between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, but not before the throne of God. There will be different gifts and abilities among Christians, says Paul, because a body needs all sorts of different parts and abilities: if you were all nose, you'd have a tough time walking around or hearing this sermon, for instance. Some of those parts will seem far better and more honorable than others, but all are necessary for the good of the body.

But sinners are always tempted to go for the glory and honor, and to be jealous of those who seem to have more. Rather than find your identity in Christ, you'll be tempted to find your identity in what makes you different and special from everybody else. That means that, just like the Corinthians, you'll be tempted to use God's gifts for vanity, not for service; and where you lack them, you'll feel envy and discontent rather than thanks for what you and others have distinctively been given.

Now, some will point to the final verse of our epistle and say, "But doesn't Paul tell us to 'earnestly desire the higher gifts'?" Yes, but those are in the next chapter: faith, hope and love. Paul's point in our reading is not to use God's gifts to make yourself stand out, but to use them in service to the entire body.

Being part of the body is vital, and you are joined to the body by the forgiveness of sins. Grace doesn't make you unique and superior to others; rather, it numbers you among all those washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. It makes you one of the multitude who has the hope of everlasting life. It makes you part of the body of Christ. In the body of Christ, says Paul, you act to serve everybody else, not stand out from the crowd; and when it is so, he says, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." This is true among Christians, because it is first true about Christ: He has suffered for the sins of the world, and the one who has suffered joins you to His suffering in baptism. Thus because the One has suffered, all have suffered His death with Him in baptism, and need not suffer for their sin on their own. And because the One – Christ – is honored in heaven at the right hand of God, all of His people will rejoice with Him there, for we are the body of Christ.

We are not rejoicing around the throne yet. We are the body of Christ in a sinful world, but take heart: as the angels rejoice in Christ in heaven, so they also rejoice that you are part of His body by repentance and forgiveness. Meanwhile, bodies take a beating in a sinful world, and that includes the Church. In this world, the body of Christ will always struggle against the attacks and wages of sin. It will always seem to have too few hands and too many appendixes. It will suffer from sharp tongues and slow ears. It will usually have more fat than muscle, and it will be predisposed to sloth over service. It will be afflicted with cancers and hardening hearts. It will come up with every excuse to take a nap and let somebody else do the work. Those who do the work will be tempted with pride and contempt, while those who don't will be tempted to sloth and jealousy. All such afflictions and sins are designed to get fingers pointing, to foster pride and resentment. They are all designed to splinter the body of Christ.

But it is the body of Christ, and Christ faithfully remains the head of His body. He who joined you to Himself in baptism does not forsake you, nor does He sit on His throne and tell you to get better or

take a walk. He still comes to you, calling you to repentance for pride and vanity, for envy and jealousy. He still comes to you, speaking His Word of forgiveness and feeding you His own blood and body so that you might remain a member of His body. That's why you repent of your sin. It is why you continue to deny yourself, take up your cross, live in Christ and thus live in service to others.

This is how you live because you already have life in His name. You are already joined to Him. You are part of His body by His grace – because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen