

Some Assembly Required

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

January 21, 2007

I.

Although preachers in the Episcopal Church frequently talk about the Gospel reading for the day, it is because of tradition and not any official requirement. And while today's Gospel reading about Jesus' first sermon is important, I instead would like to talk about the Epistle and Paul's letter to the church at Corinth.

Sometimes the Epistles can help us learn about things the Gospels don't cover. In most cases the Gospel readings deal with some aspect of Jesus and his life and ministry, or his crucifixion, or the resurrection and ascension. All of those wondrous events are essential to our worship, but they don't really focus on what happened in the decades following that first Easter. The Gospels don't give us as much background about the church that Jesus left behind, which is the church we have now.

That's one of the reasons why Paul is so influential. His writings in the New Testament are letters to the new Christian churches emerging at the time. They deal with the issues and problems that he encountered as he carried out his missionary ministry. They help us to understand how and why the church as a community of faith is so important to us today. And today's reading from Corinthians is a classic statement about how Paul viewed the church.

II.

But before we look at what Paul said, it might be helpful to review what we probably think we already know about the church. Why, exactly, is the church important? Why do we need a community of faith? What about people who say their faith is private? What if some people told you they could worship God just as effectively at the beach watching a sunset as they could in church on Sunday. We'll use that as an example. What do we think about that approach?

Well, obviously, it is good at all times and in all places to worship God. And a beach at sunset certainly could be an appropriate setting to praise and give thanks to God for the wonders of his creation.

But that type of worship does not enable us to share a common life with other Christians. It does not allow us to partake of Christ's presence in the mystery of the Eucharist. And it does not facilitate Christian mission into the community.

If a loved one is gravely ill, a beach at sunset might be an inadequate venue from which to seek God's healing mercy. If one's conscience is burdened from not following God's will, it could seem less than sincere to go to the beach to seek forgiveness.

In the same sense, if the prayers of family and friends for God's blessing are sought as a child is baptized into the life of Christ, or as a daughter is given in marriage, or as an aged parent is sent into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, a beach could be an unlikely place to receive such comfort.

For these things we need the church, and we need each other. I don't know any people who, on their deathbeds, wished they had spent less time in church. Christian life calls us not only into a relationship with God, but also into relationships with each other. Through those relationships we can share and reinforce our faith as we strengthen the bonds of affection that exist among us.

III.

With that background, let's review this fascinating part of Paul's letter to the Corinthians and his use of the human body as a metaphor for the church.

And we should begin by noting that Paul wrote about a very specialized theme. He was not writing about evangelism. He was not writing about salvation. He was not writing about sin or repentance. His focus was on the church itself. His audience was people who already were believers. And he told them how they all fit into God's plan for humanity.

Paul did two things here. First, he told the people of Corinth that together they constituted the body of Christ; the church that Jesus left behind and the church led and inspired by the Holy Spirit. Second, he told them that even though they all were different and had different gifts and abilities, they all were equally important within Christ's body. His words proclaimed that God uses diversity to create unity, and through this unity the church can grow.

And he made his point by using the human body as an example. He said that just as our human body parts must all work together, so must the people, with their diverse gifts, all work together to bring about God's purpose through our lives in the one Holy Spirit.

Just as the hands and the feet, and the eyes and the ears are all different but together with all the other parts comprise one human body, so also do each of us, with our own different and individual gifts and abilities, comprise the one body that is Christ's church.

But, at this point the message is incomplete. Something is missing. There is more to it that Paul does not mention in today's readings, although he does write about it elsewhere.

Just telling us that we all are parts of the same body and that we all are equally important is not the entire story. It would be like going into the New Orleans Saints locker room and telling them that together they are all part of a football team and are all equally important to the success of the team, and stopping right there.

What would be missing in that locker room? Even though all those players would constitute a team and all would be essential to the organization, they still would need some idea about how to work together to be effective. They would need a game plan, and a way to take the game plan off the blackboard and put it out on the playing field.

The same is true for us as parts of Christ's body, as members of the church. Even though we know that we together share a common faith, and even though we can accept that in our diversity there is unity and equality, we still need to know what to do with it. We still need to understand how to make the parts actually work together in the world.

IV.

Most of us have purchased something, or received a gift, that came in a box with all the parts in packages or envelopes, along with instructions about putting it together. If you're like me you would take all of the parts out of the box, spread them out on the floor, look at the instructions to make sure nothing is missing, and then start the process of assembly.

Today's reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians brings a similar image to mind. Paul talked about all the various parts and how they were essential to the finished product, but he did not explain how they all should come together. It might be appropriate for today's reading to have a footnote that says "some assembly required."

Then, as we start to do the assembly, where do we find the instructions? Well, for us, the instruction manual is the Bible. I once heard someone say that the word "Bible" is an acronym that stands for "basic instructions before leaving earth."

If we look to the Bible as our instruction manual, we will find that the assembly process will not be difficult. It will go a lot better that it seems to go when I have the parts spread all over the floor trying to understand something printed in four languages.

And if we call on the Holy Spirit in the process, then it would be hard to assemble something incorrectly. We will know we are part of the invisible living church that unites all baptized believers into a common life of worship, fellowship, and mission. And we will be able to see where this call to mission leads us.

This reference to mission leads me in a direction I have taken from this pulpit in the past. One of the things that our instruction manual, the Bible, calls us to do as we live into our faith in the body of Christ is to reach out to others. Being part of the church means we not only recognize that we all fit together here in this building, but also that we must actually work and do things together out in the world.

Last week we had our annual meeting and we distributed ministry sign-up sheets with places on which you could indicate where your skills and gifts and abilities might help each other and the community. There even was room to suggest new ideas. This, of course, is not the only way to assemble the ministry of mission at St. Thomas, but it is one way. We're always open to new ideas about others.

And to borrow from what Paul said, each of these ministry opportunities is equally important. None is entitled to greater honor, to use the words of today's reading, and none should be treated as inferior. Paul said to the church at Corinth that some are prophets, some are apostles, some are teachers, and some have various types of gifts that he enumerated.

The same is true for us. Some can help in the church on Sundays, others can help with people who are sick or unable to get out, still others might feel called to help those in the community who exist on the margins of life, and some of us might be teachers or have gifts of spirituality or prayer.

Whatever it is, some assembly is required. The parts must work together, not just exist together. We cannot really be the body of Christ without also functioning as the body of Christ. We each must do what we are called to do through the gifts that God through the Holy Spirit has given us.

If you already have turned in your ministry sign-up sheets we thank you for your commitment. If you still are considering what you might do we urge you to prayerfully decide on something, and see if it feels like any doors have opened. And if you need another copy of a sign-up sheet they are out in the foyer on the table under Bishop Gray's picture.

V.

Each Sunday we end our service with a post-Communion prayer and a dismissal. We ask God to send us out into the world to love and serve him, and we proclaim that we go forth in the name of Christ. Just wait, it will happen in about twenty minutes.

And what will those words really mean to us? By the time the service is over do they become part of the background music of our worship service? Do they just blend seamlessly into the worship experience and we barely remember them?

I would like to suggest that the call to mission never ends. As we go through life our gifts and abilities might change. We might contribute in different ways now than we did earlier, or than we will later. But as Paul told us, we all fit together in one way or another, and we all are called to work together so the church can fulfill God's purpose.

It is like we are running a race in this world, and the finish line is in the next world. The starting blocks are here, and the track is here, and the high hurdles certainly are here, but the finish line is out there, obscured in the mists of eternity. And as we run the race our strategies change. We sprint for a while, we trot for a while, and we might even rest for a while.

But the race goes on and we are called to run it. It is in the nature of the gifts and blessings that God continues to give us that we are asked to always give back and help others.

After celebrating the Eucharist we will have our post-Communion prayer and dismissal. I pray these words we say together as a community will be more than just the end of the service. I pray that they also can be an invitation to the Holy Spirit to fill us, and to lead us out, as the body of Christ, to do the work we are called to do. *Amen.*