

Some Assembly Required

1 Corinthians 12:11-31

January 24 , 2010

I.

You all know that sometimes I talk about the Old Testament reading or the Epistle rather than the Gospel. And even though today's Gospel reading about Jesus' first sermon is important, I instead would like us to think about Paul's letter to the Church at Corinth.

And sometimes these readings from Paul's letters give us insights that are not so apparent from the Gospels. That's partly because the Gospels focus on Jesus' life and teachings, or his crucifixion, or the resurrection and ascension. All of those wondrous events are essential to our worship, but they don't explain what happened in the decades following that first Easter.

The Gospels, for example, tell us about the kingdom that is ahead. Paul's letters, however, tell us about the church Jesus left behind. After Jesus ascended into heaven the Holy Spirit came into the world. And into those times the early church was born.

That's why Paul is so important. His writings in the New Testament are letters to the new Christian churches that were emerging at the time. These letters describe the issues and problems he encountered as he carried out his ministry. They help us understand why the church as a community of faith is so essential 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 might think we already know about the church. Why, exactly, is the church important? Why do we need a community of faith that comes together as a group to worship and work?

And 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 in which to praise and give thanks to God. It would be a good thing to worship God when we're at the beach.

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.

And 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, there might be better places to go than 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 departs into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, a beach probably would not help. Private faith at those times might seem less than fulfilling.

We need the church, and we need each other. We don't want to be alone. Jesus intended the church to be here. The Holy Spirit was the architect. We might not care for the abuses of organized religion. But 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 in which he used the human body as a metaphor for the church.

We can begin by recognizing that this letter was not about evangelism or salvation, two of Paul's favorite themes. And it was not about sin and repentance, also a frequent topic for him. Paul's focus here 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.

And he did two things. First, he told the people of Corinth that together they constituted the body of Christ. As I mentioned earlier, this is the church Jesus left behind to be 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.

By using this symbolism of hands, feet, eyes, and ears as parts of one body, Paul demonstrated that each of us, with our own different and individual gifts and abilities, comprise the one body that is Christ's church.

And this is a good image to consider. I pray that we think of ourselves in that way. But at this point the image is still incomplete. Something seems to be missing. There is more to it that Paul does not mention in today's reading, although he does do so elsewhere in his writings.

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 this afternoon and telling them that together they all are part of a football team and all are 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.

It's a wonderful thought to believe that we are joined with God and members of the church as one body. But what do we do with that oneness? Even though we can accept that in our differences we find unity and equality, we still must take the next step. Each of us still is only a part, and we are called to make the parts actually work together as one in the world.

IV.

To illustrate this point, 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 probably took the parts out of the box, spread them on the floor, looked at the instructions to make sure nothing was missing, and then started 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 about the church to have a footnote that says "Some Assembly Required, Batteries Not Included."

Then, as we start to do the assembly, where do we find the instructions? Well, for us, the instruction manual is the Bible. Someone once told me 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 certainly will go a lot better than it seems to go when I have the parts spread all over the floor trying to understand something printed in three languages.

Then, if we invite the Holy Spirit to be part of the process, we will find the power source. That's where the batteries are. And while I am not suggesting that the Energizer bunny is a symbol for the Holy Spirit, we do want to be continually animated by the Spirit as we are united with all baptized believers into a common life of worship and mission. The Spirit sheds light on the instructions, so to speak.

And just as there are many different parts in the box before they are assembled, we all have different gifts and abilities, and different things to do in the church. But whatever they might be, some assembly is required. The parts must work together, not just exist together.

If we are the body of Christ, then we must function as the body of Christ. And we do this by coming together in worship, and prayer, and being part of the things the church does and needs to do. We first are called into the church, and then through the church we go out. Our worship together is the foundation for our ministry in the world.

V.

Each Sunday we end our service with a post-Communion prayer and a dismissal. We ask God to send us out to do the work he has given us to do, and we proclaim that we go forth in the name of Christ. Just wait, it will happen in about twenty-five minutes.

And what do those familiar words really mean to us? Are they just a signal that the service is about over. Do they just blend seamlessly into our worship and we barely remember them?

I would like to suggest that the call to mission never ends. And sometimes, as we see now in the aftermath of disaster in Haiti, the call can overwhelm our senses.

How do we respond? As we go through life our gifts and abilities can change. We might reach out to help in different ways now than we did earlier in our lives, or than we will later. Sometimes we give financial support. Sometimes we work. At other times we help by encouraging those around us. And perhaps on occasion just being there as an example is important.

But as Paul said, no matter what we are or do individually, 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.

So even though we have different roles and responsibilities in the church, and even though some of us might have different perspectives on theological questions, we still are one with Jesus and the Father. And in that oneness we are called to continue to build the church, using the instruction manual that God provided to us in Holy Scripture. Some assembly still is required, and if the Holy Spirit becomes our batteries, then we cannot fail. *Amen.*