

3rd Sunday After the Epiphany
January 24, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson
1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a
Luke 4: 14-21

[click here to read scripture passages for the day](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

In his letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul talks about the whole church, including us, when he says, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

When we hear that word *member* we often think about the groups we’ve decided to join:

- I’m a member of that choir, this orchestra, my school’s soccer team.
- We’ve been members of this congregation for five years, before that we were members somewhere else.

In the US we often think about membership as something we choose, something we can opt out of if our interests change or we move away or the group doesn’t work for us anymore. So, in our context the word member may not be the most helpful translation of the Greek word that Paul uses here. The word can also be translated as “part” or “limb” and those words may better help us grasp Paul’s meaning. Paul isn’t saying that it would be good for us to join the body of Christ, he’s saying that who we each are is a part, a limb, a member, of the body of Christ, the whole church on earth.

We are all a part of a larger body - we are each a body part that can’t thrive on its own without the larger whole. No matter how strong a leg is, it doesn’t work when disconnected from the body. And, we are each a significant part, a part the body needs in order to function well. The body won’t die without a leg, a foot or a toe, but things work much better when all the parts are working together.

We are the body of Christ and individually parts, members, of it. This is the identity given to the whole church and to each of us. Certainly we can, and do, ignore our collective and personal identities but when we do, we cut ourselves off from the source of our life and our ability to be most fully who we are.

So the question before the whole church on earth is not how can we become one body - we already are Christ’s body on earth. The question for each of us is not whether we’re interested in being a part of Christ’s body - that is who we each are. Rather, the questions are - Since we already are joined together with Christ and with one another, how will we live well together in

this body? How will we care for this body so that it can be healthy and do the work it was created to do?

We know from life in our own personal bodies that things don't go well if we emphasize a few parts to the exclusion of others. If we live only in our heads and never move our limbs, our heads and our bodies suffer. If we ignore the small parts of our bodies, like our toe nails, we can be in for a world of hurt if they get ingrown or infected. We need to pay attention to the whole body.

The Apostle Paul says the same thing about the body of Christ. He says caring for this body involves honoring and tending all the diverse members. This is not how the metaphor of the body was used by others in Paul's day. Ancient politicians and philosophers worked with the image of the body to talk about families, households, cities or countries but they used it to reinforce hierarchy and oppression. The body needs a head, the thinking went, and the head is most important; those who are the hands and feet need to be slaves of the head. Every other part of the body should seek to conform to the mandates of the head.

Paul turned this thinking upside down by stressing the importance of each part and encouraging us to show greatest honor to the parts of the body that seem least important. Rather than advocating conformity with the head, Paul said our unity is found in our diverse parts working well together, in each part being valued for the unique role it plays.

This is wisdom that we still desperately need as we seek to live well as the body of Christ.

- In our society it's easier than ever to surround ourselves with people whose thinking and lifestyle conform with our own. We need to remember that our great strength in the body of Christ is the God-given unity among diverse parts, not uniformity.
- In a time when kids and adults are so often separated with kids performing and adults watching, with so many demands from activities and work, we need to be together in worship, shared faith formation and meals.
- In a culture where liberals and conservatives demean and demonize each other, the whole church needs to serve God's world together as the one body we are.
- In a church culture where LGBTQ Christians are still told they must change in order to fully participate we need to remember that we all need to be fully who we are for the body to work well.
- In a country where the most segregated time of the week is Sunday morning we need to find ways to express the unity that diverse Christians share in the body of Christ.
- In an economic structure in which CEOs make 2-300 times what the average American worker makes; and in a church culture that overemphasizes the role of the pastor, we need to remember that leaders can't function well without the whole body working together.

We also need to remember that we exist as a body not just to care for one another but to do God's work in the world. Like all bodies, this body we share needs exercise; it needs a purpose beyond itself. The Holy Spirit has given us that purpose - it is the mission that was first given to Jesus. The same Spirit that unites us together in one body is the Spirit that anointed Jesus "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." This was Jesus' mission and it is the mission we continue now as Christ's body on earth.

The Spirit led Jesus to have a particular concern for the poor and oppressed and the Spirit leads us to this concern as well. Just as Paul encouraged us to pay special attention to the least honored parts of the body of Christ, so the Spirit calls us to honor, care for and learn from all whom society sees as the last and least. We are called to work together using our varied roles and gifts to lift up the poor, to set people free, to share good news, to forgive and to heal.

This is a pretty huge job. Yet God gives us what we need to sustain us as the body of Christ. God gives us rest and renewal as we gather for worship. God provides nourishment through Holy Communion and the scriptures. God gives us prayer to remind us of who we are, to help us discern our callings, and to open us to the Spirit that empowers us.

This week, together let's pray for the whole body of Christ, for this part of the body here at Good Shepherd and for the work we share together. Let's let our physical bodies remind us to pray. When we're hungry, let that remind us to pray for God to nourish the church and for those who don't have enough food. When we feel tired, let that remind us to pray for God to renew us in worship and for all those who are exhausted by the stress of living in poverty. When we exercise, let that remind us to pray for the work of the church and for those who must walk and work for hours, for too many hours.

Let's take a few minutes now to reflect and to pray for the Spirit to work in this body and our bodies to remind us to pray this week.

We are Christ's body and individually members of it.

Thanks be to God.