

Epiphany 3—C
1 Corinthians 12:12-21,26-27
What Part Do You Play in the Body of Christ?

“Hi, Ho, Silver, away!” Some of you young people may not be familiar with those words. They come from The Lone Ranger. The Lone Ranger was a masked man in a TV western who appeared out of nowhere just in the nick of time, to strike a blow for the side of good. He would rescue the damsel in distress or break up an evil plot, and then when his work was done, he’d ride off into the sunset. “Hi, ho Silver (his horse), and away!”

Maybe the Lone Ranger makes a good TV show, but acting like one in the Christian church is never what God intended. Some people would prefer to dash in and dash out of the service, like a Lone Ranger, preferring that no one really knows who they are. Others may come and go in the same service for months and years, and not know who they’re sitting next to, and what’s worse, not even care. Another kind of “Lone Ranger” is the person who wants to do something good for the Lord, but it has to be his way or forget it. That kind of so-called “rugged individualism” soon makes a ragged congregation and can ruin a synod.

God never intended for us to do his work alone. He calls all believers the church, which means a gathering or assembly. He’s gathered us into congregations. In this part of God’s Word, he calls us “*the body of Christ*.” We certainly need each other and depend on one another. “No man is an island,” is how one poet once put it. And what St. Paul is leading us to ask in this part of the word is simply this: What part do you play in the body of Christ? He emphasizes: 1. Our Unity, 2. Our Diversity, and 3. Our Interdependence.

I. Our unity

First, let’s look at our unity, which is something the Christians in Corinth did not have. This young congregation had many problems, one of which was divisiveness. There were followers of Paul, Peter, Apollos, and another group that said, “A pox on all of you—we only follow Christ.” There was apparently jealousy, rivalry, and a concentration on their differences. Paul needed to remind them strongly: we are not in competition; we are one, one body of Christ.

Paul writes: “*The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink*” (12:12-13). There are many parts to a body, but they all form one body. In Corinth there were lots of differences and Paul mentions just two of them: Jew vs. Gentile, slave vs. free, but they were all one in Christ. There was not a one better than the other, not one more important than the other.

“*We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body.*” That reminds us what brought us into the body of Christ in the first place. We needed the Holy Spirit to give each of us faith. Without him, we would all be equally lost. Not a one was better or more deserving. Not a one could earn or work for their salvation. “*There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless*” (Romans 2:10-12). We were all united, first, in sin. All of us together were worthless.

“*We were all given the one Spirit to drink.*” Paul emphasizes the grace of God. We couldn’t drink the waters of salvation ourselves, but it had to be given to us. Earlier in the

chapter Paul described the gift of faith this way: “*No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit*” (12:3). No matter what was done in the past, no matter the background or the upbringing, each one who believes that Jesus is his Lord and Savior is united into the body of Christ. Each one recognizes Jesus as the Head of the body. We are united by grace, through faith.

Certainly, there are differences: young and old, weak and strong, male and female, but we all have a part in the body of Christ. In verse 18, Paul writes: “*God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them, to be.*” God has arranged each believer within the body, just as he wanted them. The point: He wants each of us. We all are important. We are to recognize that those talents which we and our fellow Christians have, along with their use in the church, as things determined by the Lord himself. God in his grace made you and me a member of the body of Christ for a purpose. Maybe the body part he’s made you is teaching—be it as a Christian Day School teacher, a Sunday School teacher, a coach or as a stay at home Mom. Maybe Jesus has made you this member of his body—an encourager—someone who helps others to carry their burdens in life and shares words of comfort and strength with them. Maybe the Savior has made you the leadership part of his body where you have to step forward to guide your fellow believers by word and example. Or maybe the gifts your Lord has given you in his body are these two actual body parts here. (Hands) Whether you’re swinging a snow shovel, a hammer, or a paint brush; whether you’re typing on a computer, counting the offering, or handing out bulletins with a smile, whether you’re watching little ones or filling communion cups, or visiting shut-ins, you too are functioning as one of those members of Christ’s body. That list goes on and on.

Earlier Paul was talking about gifts of the Spirit. “*There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men*” (12:4-6). We admire gifted people: those with great looks, musical talent, speaking ability, athletic prowess. They are the ones who win popularity contests and are deemed a success. In our world, there are far too many nobodies.

We live in a world where people get cut. You try out for a play, a band, a team, and some are going to get cut. Many more don’t even try. The good news here is that God doesn’t operate that way. No one gets cut from the body of Christ. Everyone has an important purpose.

In God’s world there are no nobodies. Everybody is a somebody to God. You see, Jesus died for everyone. He wants everyone to be saved and to come the knowledge of the truth. And once we believe, each of us has an important part in the body. Each child of God has a role in the family—that brings us to:

II. Our diversity

The Lord never intended us to be exactly the same. Each part of the body has a different function. Yet because we are different, our sinful natures would like to capitalize on that and cause friction. Let Paul illustrate: “*If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body, it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body*” (15-16). Paul is pointing out that some parts of the body can get jealous of other parts, and there’s no good reason for it. And yet we have a tendency to downplay our gifts and our importance in the body of Christ:

The teacher says: I'm not a principal. I don't count.

The member says: I'm not on the council. It doesn't matter what I think.

The women say: We're not voters. We don't matter at all.

The singer says: I'm not a director, not even a soloist. What I do doesn't count for much.

The elder says: I'm not a pastor. I can't do this job as well as he can.

The older ones say: We don't have kids anymore. Why should we support the school?

The younger ones say: Why should the pastors spend so much time visiting the old folks?

Jealousy raises its ugly head all over the place.

On the other hand, so does pride. Paul also warns in verse 21: "*The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'*" Pastors need secretaries, teachers need helpers and aids. We all need Sunday School teachers and cleaners and organists and ushers. The poor need the wealthy. The wealthy need those with more time. We certainly need each other, for a multitude of different jobs.

It's not good to all be the same. We read, "*If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?*"

(17) What would a football team be with only quarterbacks? What would an orchestra be if it were all violins, or trumpets or piccolos? I like piccolos as much as the next guy, and they can add just the right sound to music, but if the whole orchestra consisted of nothing but piccolos, who could stand the shrieking? We need all the different parts of the body of Christ.

The old proverb says: There are too many chiefs and not enough Indians. Let's remember that there is really only one chief: that's Jesus. If we let him be the head of his body, then we'll all be able to follow him. David had the right perspective. God had called him to be a king. And yet he said, "*I'd rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than dwell in the tents of the wicked*" (Psalm 84:10). The humblest of jobs for the Lord is so much more important than the highest position the wicked world has to offer.

So dear friends, what part should you play? Young people—we certainly need pastors and teachers, but not everyone should be one. We need Christian businessmen and women, Christian farmers, carpenters, secretaries, waitresses, faithful mothers and fathers. And for all of us: If you're not sure where you fit, if you're not clear about what you should be doing in the body of Christ, don't be afraid to try different things.

One thing is clear: we certainly do need each other. As our last point, Paul emphasizes:

III. Our interdependence

"If one part suffers; every part suffers with it" (26). If one part suffers, we all suffer. What happens when you stub your little toe on the edge of the bedroom door? The whole body suffers. And there is certainly enough-suffering in the body of Christ. One is in the hospital with pneumonia. Another dies of cancer. One family loses a young person in an accident. Another is evicted from their apartment because the money is gone. A couple married for years announce divorce. An elderly woman spends 24 hours a day caring for her invalid husband. Do we simply ignore it? Paul says: "*Bear one another's burdens*" (Galatians 6:2), and "*Serve one another in love*" (Galatians 5:13).

On the other hand, Paul says, "*If one part is honored, every part rejoices with it*" (26). We rejoice together. Someone gets honored for job well done. We rejoice with them. Someone else is celebrating a marriage, an anniversary, the birth of a child and we all give thanks to God.

We as a congregation sent over \$40,000 for mission work. We did it together for the glory of God, and we can rejoice!

There's an old Scandinavian proverb which says: "Shared sorrows are half sorrows. Shared joys are double joys." How well that fits with the Bible.

Every generation has its weaknesses and struggles. It seems to me that the generation coming up has trouble with the concept of church and the need to gather with others in a congregation. The computer has probably not helped here. We are used to being alone and while we are perhaps connected with more people than ever through the internet, we also seem to gather with others less than ever.

Do you remember the Lone Ranger? He wasn't really alone. Even he had Silver his horse, and his sidekick Tonto. In the body of Christ, we certainly do need each other. Ben Franklin said it during the Revolutionary War: "We had all better hang together; or we'll hang separately." How true that is in the body of Christ. In his church, there is no place for jealousy; or Lone Rangers. By hanging together, listening to Christ, using our gifts for the good of others, the body will flourish and grow! God grant it. Amen.

Hymns: 340, 566