

“Many Gifts, One Body” – Feb. 4, 2024

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

1 Cor. 12:20-27

20 As it is, there are many members yet one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” 22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect, 24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. 27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (NRSVUE)

Have you noticed that you often put your hands on your body in the place that hurts or is uncomfortable? I invite you to gently place your hands on an aching or discomfoting area of your body.

Let us pray: “Almighty God, heal us of all illnesses of body, mind, spirit, and relationships with the power of Your indwelling presence so that we may serve You with a loving heart. Amen.”

Do you know where the center of the body is?

In his poem, titled “I am standing there now,” Nohae Park, a Korean poet, gives us a hint. I will paraphrase his poem:

*The center of the body is not a heart [or brain].
When the body is sick, the pain becomes the center.
When your nail end is painfully sore,
all your nerves go to the tip of the fingernail.
Likewise, where human dignity is trampled,
Where God’s creatures are suffering,
That place becomes the center of the universe.
That place is where we feel pain.*

God suffers when God’s creatures suffer. God suffers when you and I are hurt by people or by social, systemic injustice. In Galilee, when people were marginalized and rejected as gentile immigrants, they became the center of Jesus’ prayers and ministries because they were precisely the spot, the center where Jesus felt pain. God suffers. God cares. God heals. God even becomes one of us.

In Paul's time, Corinth was a colony of the Roman Empire and a commercial and religious hub having both seasonal and year-round sailors and travelers. The Corinthian church had members with diverse cultural and national backgrounds. Some of them were affluent, while others were poor. Corinthian Christians had almost every problem contemporary churches may have. If I share one of the backgrounds of today's reading, it is about pride in spiritual gifts. It seems that some people prided themselves on having greater spiritual gifts. Paul questioned this attitude, saying: "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. . . . To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (1 Cor. 12:4, 7)

Paul invited Corinthian Christians to have a sense of community as one body of Christ. Paul compared the Church, the body of Christ, to the human body, saying all the parts are needed, all have their functions, all are indispensable and share in the body's success and failure. Paul invited them not to ignore the powerless, the poor, and those who are despised, but to respect all. Paul knew that those weak, despised, and rejected were the center of Jesus' prayers and ministries.

Paul said, "The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part. Likewise, everybody in our church is important and needs to be respected."

Do you know what compassion means? Compassion comes from Latin, and literally means "to suffer with." Paul wanted the Church to be a compassionate community of faith. That's why he said, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. You are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it."¹

As you may know, I attended the fifth Gateways to God Retreat for four days until last Monday. It is a two-year-long Spiritual Direction Training Program. This time, the leaders shifted the gear from personal spiritual growth to the life of a community.

The leaders reminded us that congregations have borrowed skills and wisdom from business and professional sources, learning how to be better organized and more efficient. Without underestimating their positive effects, we were reminded that they should not dominate our attitude and method of working together as a body of Christ. One of the questions participants were invited to ponder was: "What helps

¹ Message Bible paraphrased.

this community/church, and its angels cross the threshold into God's presence? Into the Sacred?" We were especially invited to pay more attention to spiritual vitality and gifts of the beloved in the body of Christ when churches are struggling with the loss of members, and heavy financial burdens, and so on.

I believe our spiritual vitality and gifts come from God, who calls us the Beloved. As Henri Nouwen said, the greatest gift from God is the gift of our "Belovedness." As the beloved, how can we express our gratitude to God, saying "I love you, too" in words and actions, while sharing God-given gifts in the church, the community, and the world, with joy? Prayer allows us to listen attentively to the voice that calls us the Beloved.

Many gifts, One body!

Paul's teaching is about appreciating and respecting one another as part of the Body of Christ, the community of the Beloved. In every corner of our living together as a Church, the Body of Christ, we are called to share with each other the gift of our Belovedness.² We don't have to prove it. God loves all God's children. God's grace that makes our brokenness whole through Jesus Christ will continue to mold us to grow and live a life of the beloved together.

As we will celebrate Holy Communion today, in which bread is taken, blessed, broken, and given to all at the Lord's table, I invite you to imagine that, first, you are taken by God's hands. Second, you are blessed to live as God's beloved children all the time. Third, you (and all of us) are broken, but in God's grace, our brokenness can be "an opening toward the full acceptance of ourselves as the Beloved." Finally, we are called to give ourselves to others, feeling and celebrating the joy of giving. Taken, Blessed, Broken, and Given. The true joy and happiness comes from the fact that we are in God's loving hands.³

In this welcoming, compassionate, and beloved Swift Memorial community of faith, we are all called to share our gifts to build a healthy, disciple-making congregation, the beloved Body of Christ. In this faith community, as Paul said, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." And all God's people say, "Amen!"

² Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*.

³ *Ibid.*