

## Epiphany 3C 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Have you ever read an obituary that said the deceased was a life-long member of the local Episcopal church? And even though you've been around a while in that particular parish, you have no idea who this person is? Sometimes folks will stop by St Clement's on a Sunday morning or during the week and I have the opportunity to talk with them a little. Very proudly they'll tell me that their parents were married here, they were baptized and confirmed here, they were married here, and their children were baptized and confirmed here. But that was 25 or 30 years ago – of course, I've heard their name (**NOT**) –but once the kids were confirmed, they got out of the habit of coming. "You know how it is," they say to me.

Or the kids who stop worshipping on Sunday once they go to college. That's not a given as some might think. They're told it's okay and even expected to not have a faith community. When they get older and married and have children, they'll probably return. That sends a real strong message about the importance of faith and the priority of belonging to a faith community and all that entails.

Being a Christian means being a member of the body of Christ. And if we're a member of a body, we need to participate for the body to be whole and complete. Christ was always in community. Always. And that's how he fulfilled his own ministry.

Every other time I've read this passage I've focused on each of us telling other members of the body that we have no need of them ... that they're not important. We know that's not the way it works. But this passage also reminds us that individual parts of the body cannot just stop participating in the body; that affects the entire body. It's no longer the body saying to one of its members, "We have no need of you," but rather a member of the body saying to the whole, "You have no need of me." Some people don't believe this – you know the perception that once you leave or draw back, someone will fill in and take your place. Or if no one takes your place – oh well. Or the feeling that I'm going to only do so much because I've put in my time (as if it were prison!) and it's time for me to retire.

While reading this passage, I thought about what it might be like to name my body parts and then what it would feel like if they just stopped working one day. It's kind of weird but it works..... "Yeah, Rachel, my right hand, decided she'd had enough and was tired of doing most of the work. So she was stepping back and leaving it up to Louise my left hand to step in and take the load." Next thing I know Rachel is firmly planted in the right pocket of my jeans and won't come out. And Louise the leftie has no idea how to do the things her more dominant sister did. So the ability of my body to do the many things it was doing begins to decrease. Laurie, my left eye, sees what Rachel has done and decides she's tired of being the visionary and seeing clearly the way ahead. "You don't need me," she says. You still have my sister, Rosalind. She can do all your seeing." So she closes her eyelid and refuses to open it. But the problem is that without Laurie, Rosalind's vision and sight lack perspective and the body keeps veering off track and become unfocused. I know that's kind of a strange metaphor, but do you get the point?

It's interesting that we get this passage today about the need for the wholeness of bodies and bodies being a metaphor for the community of faith in Christ. We're in that part of the year when each parish takes stock of its body – today there are hundreds of Episcopal parishes around the country who are having annual meetings and who have done many of the same things the staff has done over the past month – pulling together as much information as possible so we can present a comprehensive picture of who St Clement's is and how we live out our identity. We take a look at each person in the directory and talk about what they've been doing, about their own health, and how they live into their identities as members of the parish of St Clement. Sharing our financial resources is of course crucial to the daily operations of the parish, but so is sharing ourselves in time and skills.

That's what it means to participate in and with the body. Community was essential to Jesus and his work. Of course he went off alone to pray every once in a while – we all need to retreat and renew – but he always returned to do his work as a member of a body, of a community that furthered God's work in the world,

Last week's passage from I Corinthians said that to each is given a gift of the Spirit for the common good. Not for our own edification, but for the good of the body. When the body is whole and healthy, then it does what God expects of it – feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, cares for those in need, and it follows the teachings and ministry of Jesus Christ for the common good.

There's a corollary question I often get – a topic that often comes up about participating in parish ministries. "I do lots of volunteering in the community. How's that any different from the volunteer work I do at church?" Let's see..... First, what we do in and through the church is not volunteer work. When we were baptized, we took on the mantle of Christ and when we were confirmed, we affirmed the presence of this mantle. When we work with others in this community to support one another and to reach out to the community and the world, we're not just volunteering; we are fulfilling our responsibilities as Christians. Our motivation for fulfilling our responsibilities as members of the body of Christ comes from the Christ that is in each one of us. That motivation is ontologically ingrained in our souls and psyches. Christ within us is an essential part of our core being.

Our physical bodies have need of even the smallest, seemingly most insignificant parts. They are just as important as those visible, strong parts. The body of Christ is the same way. No person or work is insignificant; no contribution is more important than any other contribution. We are Christians, members of the body of Christ from the day we are baptized until the day we die.

This morning at a forum at the Cathedral in Cleveland, the President of the House of Deputies of the national church said "Don't try to do the work of Jesus alone. Belonging to the community drenches us in grace." One of the younger theologians of the church has written: "There is no such thing as belonging without participating. That abrogates the nature of the body. A body does not work when one part checks out for a few years; not only will its function be unfulfilled, but the rest of the body will be thrown out of balance. Belonging is not a one-sided affair. We are given the gift of belonging at baptism; but we are also signing up for the responsibility of functioning as a part of the body of Christ." (Raewynne Whitley, *Feasting on the Word*, C1)

Each one of us is important in this community – each one of us makes a difference when we are present and when we share our God-given gifts, when we share our financial gifts, and when we share our gift of time. All are from God; as baptized Christians we are responsible for sharing who God has made and all the blessings God has given us – not for our own good, but for the common good through this community of Jesus Christ. And our participation as members of this body is essential for the body to fulfill its responsibility as the Body of Christ.

Coming together this morning for the annual meeting is not just about moving through an agenda. It's about relationships, strengthening some and beginning others, and in the process, strengthening our body of Christ. This morning is not only about the food that is made for our physical bodies but the food that comes through giving a little of ourselves to one another. This morning is about nourishing this community as a whole body. For those who say, "You have no need of me": that's just not true. You are members of this community and we need you actively among us to be a whole body of Christ. This morning, however, we will strengthen the parts of the body that are here, and adjust to the holes left by those who are not here, encouraging them to join us so that we are indeed a complete and healthy body of Christ.

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