

3 Epiphany January 27, 2019

In the name of God, who in Jesus
taught us the meaning of unconditional love.
Amen

Although I usually focus on the Gospel for my sermon, today I would like us to take another look at Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians and to really listen to its message for us, right now, right here at St. Cyprian's. We heard :

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

Of all the letters we have from Paul, this letter to the church at Corinth may have been the most difficult for him to write. Things had gone wrong, and Paul is trying to give these people of this new church, some vision of what a Christian community really is, what it could be, and what it should be. When we really tune in to what he is saying, we realize that he is introducing an image of Christian community that is as vivid today as when he first presented it.

Look at your own body, he says to the Corinthian Christians. Think of the mystery of it...the limbs, the interior parts, their many functions...yet you are conscious of being one entity, one person. You are many, yet you are one. *So it is with Christ*, Paul says. And then he offers another image, another body...the Body of Christ. He points the Corinthian Church to the risen and living Christ, and he has them, and us, think of all Christians as hands and feet and members of that ONE body. As he does so, he calls them to consider something that surely must have stretched their minds every bit as it does ours. He wrote: *We were all Baptized into ONE body...the Body of Christ...whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, male or female.* Twenty centuries later, Paul's image still calls us to inclusiveness - and a genuine caring for all others- a call that, in all honesty, challenges us. Still, hopefully we hear this with great solemnity.

Paul goes on to present a thought that is vital to this community, or to any other Christian community. Differences in people do not mean that they do not belong together. He wrote: *If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body.* No member of a Christian community can say to another that he or she does not have some gift to bring to the others, to the whole body. *The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you."*

Paul's next words reveal the immense sensitivity sometimes hidden in his stern personality. He says, *"The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable"*. As we follow his words, they become more deeply pastoral. He writes, *"God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member."* Here is an echo of something heard again and again in the New Testament. It echoes the song of our Lord's mother, the Magnificat, the song we

sang for a few weeks just a bit ago. Mary's song says, "*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.*" In it, Mary echoes our Lord's insistence that, in the Kingdom of God, in God's Realm, those we deem to be last will be first. ////In other words, no one soul is better than another. No-one matters more...or less... in God's realm...in the Body of Christ.

And I believe that about covers it. ALL are welcome. ALL are precious. Including those with whom we disagree; including those of a different sexual orientation; including those who dress differently, including those from another walk of life, or who are ill, or who are the neediest among us. ALL are precious. ALL are welcome. THIS is the Body of Christ. Yes, it IS a body broken. But, within it there are many gifts, much that can be offered for the good of all, for the good of the health of the BODY. St. Paul would say that we have all the gifts necessary. But, we need to CLAIM our gifts...and then, offer these gifts for the good of ALL.

Notice Paul's reason for being supportive of varying gifts in a congregation. He writes: *SO that there may be no dissension within the body.* Dissension itself is not the danger. But, dissension can make it impossible that members will have the same care, equal care for one another, for all others in the body. That what one may have to offer may be undervalued or overlooked.

When Paul was inspired to compare the church to a human body, he gave us an image of ourselves that we are still growing into. It is a strong image, because each of us IS a body and we know what he is talking about. In order to pick up a glass of orange juice, it is not enough to have the mind think it; it is not enough to have an arm and four fingers. Without an opposing thumb, the orange juice just sits there. Certainly we all know that if one part of our own body is hurting, it affects us entirely. If we have a back problem or stub our toe, everything seems to be about that back or about that toe.

Paul knew he could get people's attention talking about their bodies. What Paul was trying to do metaphorically was to persuade people that what was true INSIDE their own skin was also true outside of it, that WHOLENESS needs many different parts, all working together. That is why our intercessory prayers are so important. We want healing and wholeness for each and all for whom we pray. Paul shows us how deeply he sees into the nature of Christian community. He sees such a community as an organic whole, a web of being where *if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.* Think of the grace available then in such a community to every member, both in times of need and vulnerability, and in their times of joy and celebration.

I hope we all realize that just as Paul's letter was written to the church in Corinth, it is also written for this church in St. Augustine, to guide OUR thinking and OUR goals and OUR way of being a church in God's Holy name.

Not so long ago, about a dozen years ago, in fact, was an incredible time in the life of this church, with the previous vicar leaving the Episcopal Church and with most of our congregation following him. For the very few who did not leave, there was such a tangle of emotions. Certainly there was sorrow as there would be in the breakup of any family. There was confusion and anger and a keen sense of betrayal.

But, think of St. Cyprian's now. There is a wonderful sense of gratitude that this wonderful St. Cyprian's is still here, right where it has been for over 100 years. But with a keen sense of vitality and welcome. Now there is a tangible feeling of joy and fellowship and sharing our spiritual journeying. And, there is an expectation that this church will continue to grow and increasingly be utterly vital in each person's life who comes here. Most importantly, there is the sense of the Presence of God here with us, right here.

Maybe some of us never gave it much thought, or never really got it, never really understood what Paul meant when he called us the Body of Christ...that great mystery of God that binds us together whether we know it, or feel it. Maybe we didn't quite get it when he said that we ARE the Body of Christ and individually members of it. That whenever anyone of us laughs or cries or lives or dies we are all affected by it, whether we know it or not.

But...I think most of us DO get it today, because we are hearing it here, right here, at St. Cyprian's where we truly do care about others and where we know that others DO care about us. . Yes, there was sadness that some broke away from us and, yes, we did limp for a while. But, according to our Lord's promises, our small congregation offered our brokenness at the altar...ourselves, our souls and bodies,... and our Lord Jesus Christ came to us and healed us. And now, here we are together, where, as Paul said..."When one suffers, we all suffer." That is why our Intercessory Prayers are solemn for us; we really do care when another suffers. And haven't we had such happy times of celebration because something wonderful has happened to just a part of this body?

SO, Look at us!! As God has promised, this is now St. Cyprian's because YOU are here and YOU are a part of why we are whole again. And, more than that, we are happily reaching out beyond our own worship place, reaching out beyond our sweet world of fellowship and love, to take our love, and our gifts beyond us, out into a hurting world, because we want to, because we know we are blessed and because we have much to share. Praise God!

In one of our beautiful renewal hymns we sing, "Take a look, open your eyes, He's here in plain view." Yes, the Presence of the Lord **is** in this place. Praise God for every member of this Body of Christ. St. Paul would be proud!

AMEN