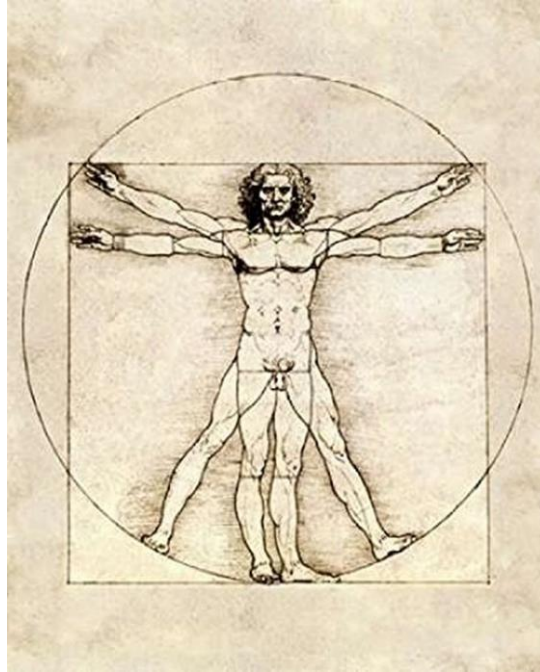


THE BODY AND ITS MEMBERS



1 Cor. 12:12 "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."

Within today's reading from St. Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians is found one of the most vivid and most recurrent images of the Christian Church. For it is here that St. Paul cleverly describes the Church as a body, as a living, breathing organism. And all individual Christians are described by Paul as simply parts or members of that one body. This is a wondrous vision of the Church. And as such, St. Paul reminds the Corinthians that "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.'" The parts of the body must all live and function together in order for the body to survive and be whole.

However, as we all know, the Body of Christ, the Church, is grievously dismembered; it is broken, fractured into many pieces, by different denominations and theological interpretations, by various nationalities and cultures, by race and socio-economic status. Some parts of Christianity seem to function as though we were many bodies, not one; as though we could survive as a dismembered hand or a headless corpse. As a result, the Christian Church is afflicted and sorely hindered by our sad divisions. The Body of Christ is sick, and needs to be healed, and that healing is not an easy or painless process. So what are we as members of the Church doing to heal the Body of Christ?

According to the Catechism in our Book of Common Prayer, as mentioned last week, "[T]he mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." Christians are called to restore wholeness to the Body of Christ, to reconcile all people to each other and to God, to re-member and restore the Body of Christ. We are the responsible ones here. We are not meant to be just waiting around for God to fix this. Thus the mission of the Church is clearly NOT to gather small groups of people together here or elsewhere to self-righteously espouse our particular version of the faith and belief. We are not meant to gather together a group of like-minded people, that all look alike, that all believe the same things and all speak the same language. We **are** meant to gather all of the various bits and

pieces of our fractured body together, in order to bring restoration to the Body of Christ and to fulfill our mission as the Church.

We humans, however, have this natural tendency to migrate towards that which is familiar to us and comfortable and safe, and to avoid too much complexity or too much change. It is often difficult for us to live with 'the other', with those whose experience are different from our own, with those who look or think differently than we do. The community that lives within the shadow of this church, for example, is not a very diverse group. And if the mission of the Church is to minister to ALL people, then we cannot authentically be a predominantly white church. We cannot be a congregation of just one race or one culture or one class or one language even. "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."

Our Bishop, Ian Douglas, famously in his interview to become bishop boldly declared that he as a Professor of Mission did not believe in what he called "adjectival" ministries in the Church. He does not believe that we should intentionally organize a Hispanic church, or a Haitian congregation, or even an African-American one, because that goes against the very mission of the Church to restore all people to unity with God and each other. So likewise we cannot organize ourselves as an Anglo-Saxon only church or

an upper class only congregation. The mission of the Church is not to divide and separate us, but to bring us all together, to restore the various parts of the Body into a functioning unity. I want St. John's to minister to all the people that live in this community and beyond, regardless of race or class or ethnic background.

Rice University did a study a few years ago that actually measured the racial diversity of Christian churches in this country. Using a standard of at least 20% of 'another race' in actual attendance on Sundays other than the predominant one, whatever that was, the study sought to calculate what percentage of Christian congregations in this country were indeed racially diverse. Remember St. Paul's words about how we are all one Body, and in Christ there is no Greek or Jew, free or slave, male or female. Christianity has from its very beginning been remarkably open to all people. And yet the results of that study were shocking, because 2,000 years later, in this midst of this racially diverse country of ours, less than 8% of Christian congregations in the United States were racially diverse. Less than 3% were if one removes the Roman Catholics from the equation. Too many of our parishes are either ghettos or gated-communities, that are seeking to preserve the safety and protection of some particular faction or group or race or culture within the Church. Thus we must openly acknowledge that we are called to restore ALL people to God

and each other. And one part of the Body cannot say to another that we have no need of you.

Did we not take vows at our Baptism to respect the dignity of every human being? Did we not take vows to seek and serve Christ in all persons? To strive for justice and peace among all people? To proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? Why aren't we doing that? That is the question! How can we just turn away from our mission as the people of God? In the 1950's, against great political opposition, President Harry Truman forcibly began desegregated our armed forces. In the 1960's, so-called 'red lining' of certain residential neighborhoods was outlawed by the Fair Housing Act. In the 1970's, the Supreme Court authorized forced busing to begin desegregating our public schools. The Civil Rights Movement forced the desegregation of our businesses, our buses and lunch counters. And yet after all of that, we still divide up far too often into our own little like-minded groups on Sundays, into our racial or socio-economic camps, we still gather into our familiar tribes and really have nothing to do with the 'other,' with 'those people'! Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words are still as true today as they were 50 years ago, that Sunday morning at 11:00 is the most segregated hour of the week in America. I was utterly astounded to discover in a recent national survey that 75% of the whites in this country have only white friends in their social circles, and that 65% of

blacks in this country have only black friends in their social circles, though we all live in such a remarkably diverse country and desegregated society. I thought we were beyond that. Yet sadly we remain a divided people, politically and racially and socio-economically. The Body of Christ is sick, and in need of healing. And how are we ever going to come together as a nation if we continue to divide ourselves up like that, if we do not cross over the barriers that lie between us?

We may need to take some 'affirmative action' here at times to incorporate 'the others' into our lives, and their cultures into the life of this parish and community. And that may be the single greatest challenge for St. John's. So how do we learn to better understand and to respect each other, and each other's different traditions and practices? How do we learn, in Rodney King's words, to just get along together? What can't we all just get along? Our lack of diversity is both our greatest failure as a congregation and our greatest challenge.

Yes, the Town of Washington itself is predominantly white and wealthy, and we need to ask the tough questions about why that is so, and what can we do about it? Is this the way it is because of the lack of affordable housing in our area? If so, then we need to stand up for more affordable housing in our community. Or is this so because of the subtle and often systemic race and class prejudice

within our society and ourselves? If so, we need to be willing to openly talk about these things, if we are really interested in fulfilling the mission of the church, which is why some of us, though few, recently read and discussed the book "Waking Up White." And this is why I am encouraging all of you to read "White Picket Fences" by Julia Amy Becker, our neighbor here in Washington. We have got to be able to openly talk about the racial disparity in our country, as evidenced so clearly this week by the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, and the responding protests and riots. The sin of racism in this country is destroying our unity as a people, and our mission as the Church.

There is, for example, another Episcopal congregation in town, and yet we apparently have almost nothing to do with them, our own people? Why is that so? How do we bridge that gap? There are other congregations in this town, which is why I am delighted to announce that the six established religious groups in the Town of Washington are now working together, in future Food Bank appeals, at the Farmer's Market, with a Blood Drive, and with the State's plan of distributing prepared meals to the hungry. There is so much more that we can do, if only we will work together. I believe that this parish in the Season after Pentecost is up to that challenge, as we, the Body of Christ, move forward in our mission of reconciling all people to God and each other through Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.