

ONE BODY

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Series C)

January 23, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The epistle lesson for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany comes from *Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, chapter 12, verses 12 through 31a. This continues last week's reading. Paul teaches us that the congregation is the body of Christ. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From 1 Corinthians 12, beginning at verse 12, we read in Jesus' name.

¹² 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. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot should 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. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, 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 parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, ²⁴ which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, ²⁵ that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But earnestly desire the higher gifts.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear saints of God and members of Trinity Free Lutheran Church.

The congregation is a gift to you. And I mean this congregation. When we say that the congregation is a gift, we don't simply mean that the abstract concept of a congregation is a gift. Sometimes we do that with the gifts of God. We abstract them. We think of them only as

ONE BODY (1 Corinthians 12:12-31a)

concepts instead of real things. But that is not right. God gives us real gifts. So we mean this real congregation, with real people, with flesh and blood. This real congregation is a gift. No one is ever blessed by receiving the abstract concept of a gift. Your wife will not be pleased with you if you give her the abstract concept of oven mitts for Valentine's Day. That's even worse than giving her actual oven mitts. And God does not give us abstract gifts. He gives real salvation. He gives real forgiveness for real sins. He gave his real Son in real flesh and blood. He gives us the real Holy Spirit through Baptism with real water. Jesus gives us his real body and blood to eat and drink. And he has given us a real congregation. This is the real congregation. This is the real body of Jesus Christ. This is truly a gift of God to us.

The doctrine of the congregation begins in the Gospel. In Lutheran doctrine, we talk a lot about Law and Gospel. I'll define these two doctrines: "The Law is the divine Word that tells us what we must do" (H.U. Sverdrup's *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism*, q. 11). And, "The Gospel is the good news of the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Savior" (*ibid*, q. 12). These are the two great doctrines of the Bible. So there's kind of a predictable formula for sermons, where, instead of preaching Law *and* Gospel, we preach Law, *then* Gospel. It's kind of become a joke in Lutheran circles. First the pastor says that you are all dirty, rotten sinners, because you have violated God's Law. And this is true. Then he tells you to be of good cheer, because Jesus has removed your sin by his death and resurrection. This, also, is true. Sometimes this Law, *then* Gospel outline is appropriate and fits the text. Other times, it's a formula that we impose on the text when we really shouldn't. It's kind of like the preacher only has one sermon, and he just preaches a different version of it every Sunday. When preachers do this, sermons become predictable, and the Law really loses its bite. The preacher might really lay into you with Law, and you probably deserve it. But you're sitting there thinking, Okay, you're probably right, but I don't really feel that bad, because I know that in eight minutes and twelve seconds you're going to tell me that everything is okay. So it's kind of like the Gospel just becomes a vaccination against the Law. That's not good. Christians should not be immune to the Law. The Law is God's Word. The Law is the will of God. The Law is good. So the Law, *then* Gospel formula isn't always the best way to go. When you hear me do it, it might be because it's the right way to handle a text, or it could be that I just couldn't figure out anything better. That happens sometimes.

But today we start with the Gospel, because the doctrine of the congregation begins in the Gospel. Once we establish that, we go on to considering what God's Word has to say about how we live in the congregation. But we won't leave the Gospel behind. "In this Christian Church, [the Holy Spirit] daily forgives abundantly all [our] sins" (*Small Catechism*, "The Apostles' Creed"). And whenever we talk about the good works God calls us to, we can't leave the Gospel behind, because we are bound to sin against these commands of God. So we return, over and over again, to confess our sin and be forgiven. So we'll start in the Gospel, then we'll consider the good works God calls us to, and we will keep God's forgiveness close at all times.

The doctrine of the congregation begins with Jesus' death and resurrection. Your membership in the body of Christ begins with your Baptism. We are baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection. Through Baptism you have been buried with Christ, and you have been raised with Christ (Col. 2:12). This is how we receive the benefits of Christ's sacrifice. We are united with the physical body of Jesus Christ.

ONE BODY (1 Corinthians 12:12-31a)

Baptism connects us to the physical body of Christ. And if each individual Christian is sacramentally connected to the body of Christ, then we are also connected to one another. This can be seen especially clearly in many of Paul's letters. In Romans (6:1-11) and Colossians (2:11-12), he speaks of Baptism uniting us with Jesus in his death and resurrection. And in Galatians (3:27), Ephesians (4:4-6), and here in 1 Corinthians, he speaks of how Baptism also unites us with one another in the one body of Jesus Christ. So he says in this passage, "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body ... and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (12:13). So one of the benefits of your Baptism is that you are united with the other members of the Church. This is part of the reason why we reject the false notion that a person can be baptized as a sort of "fire insurance" and then go on living however they want. Baptism incorporates you into the body of Christ. It joins you with other Christians, especially those in the same congregation.

Each member, then, is a gift from God to every other member of the congregation. I am a gift from God to you. That is really uncomfortable to say, because I was raised to know that I should be humble, and if I don't feel humble, I should at least fake it. Pastors also tend to get themselves in trouble when they think of themselves as "God's gift to the Church." But there's a biblical, and even humble way to understand this. And it's in the sense that every member of the body is a gift to the rest of the body. So I am a gift to you. You are a gift to me. You are a gift to your brother or sister over there. And they are a gift to you. Every member of the body is a gift to every other member of the body. And we can understand this in a humble way when we recognize that God gave us to one another in order to serve one another. It's not like I am just so awesome that you're all privileged to know me. And it's not like you're just so awesome, that the rest of us are privileged to get to go to church with you. No. God gave us to one another in order to serve one another. Humility is considering others more significant than yourself. This is the right way to think of yourself as God's gift to this congregation. God gave you to the other members of this congregation in order to serve them and be served by them

So I want you to hear and believe this: You are God's gift to the rest of the members of this congregation. You should believe that, because it's true. Then you should also ask yourself, *What kind of gift am I? How am I serving the other members?* Because it is God's will for every single member of the congregation to serve the other members. 1 Peter (4:10) says, "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace."

Every member of the congregation has some kind of service they provide to the rest of the congregation. And these services differ from one member to another.

Paul makes this sermon pretty easy, because I don't have to think of an illustration to teach this. Paul says that the body of Christ is like, well, a body. "The body does not consist of one member, but of many" (12:14). He speaks of feet, hands, eyes, ears, and noses. They are all different, and they all have different functions. One member should not be jealous of another member. Rather, each member should consider its place in the body and how it can serve the body. When we become jealous of one another and seek to steal their place in the body, it brings harm to the whole body, including ourselves.

Consider your hand. One of the things you do with your hand is wave to people. What if your foot became jealous and started waving to people. For one thing, you would look really weird. People might think you were trying to kick box them. Then you would probably fall over and hurt yourself. And it's the same way in the body of Christ. We should not try to be something we're not, but recognize that God has composed this body according to his wisdom, and then we serve with the gifts he has given us.

ONE BODY (1 Corinthians 12:12-31a)

So there's a natural diversity in the body of Christ, and there is also a unity. This isn't like the kind of diversity the world talks about. These days, when the world talks about diversity, they usually include different beliefs and different worldviews. It ends up being a very contradictory kind of diversity.

But the Church is to have unity in those things. Earlier in 1 Corinthians, Paul urges them to "agree, and ... be united in the same mind and the same judgment" (1:10). The Christian Church is to have unity in mind and doctrine, while we use our diverse gifts to work toward one common purpose, which is to build up and extend God's Kingdom.

Paul's point with his illustration of the body is that each member is indispensable. And "on those parts of the body that we think less honorable, we bestow the greater honor" (12:23). He goes on, "But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (12:24-25). So there is no place in the body of Christ for seeking one's own honor. This is one of those places where we all need to check ourselves, because this is the fundamental nature of sin; we seek our own glory. This goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve desired to become like God. But in the body of Christ, we should seek to honor Christ, the head of the body, and we do this by honoring and serving one another.

I should say something about church membership. Membership is different than simply attending church. We have those who are not members, but attend regularly. And this is good. But I would encourage any of you who attend regularly to consider membership. I would also encourage you to not take it lightly. Don't just join. Consider it first. Becoming a member means affirming the doctrine this congregation confesses. This goes back to what Paul says earlier in the letter, that we should all agree and be of the same mind (1:10). This is part of the reason why we do new member classes whenever someone wants to join. If you're going to affirm the doctrine we confess, we should first make clear exactly what that doctrine is before we ask to you to affirm it. Membership also includes a promise to "live a life becoming to a Christian and to be faithful in attendance and divine worship," as well as a promise to "use your spiritual gifts for the building up of the church." Anyone who makes these promises should take them seriously. We all sin, and we often break our promises, in which case we should repeatedly confess our sin and be forgiven, but we should never make promises we don't even intend to keep. If you have hang-ups with our doctrine, or if you really don't intend to use your gifts to serve the rest of the congregation, then you should not seek membership. But you are, of course, welcome and encouraged to continue worshipping with us.

Members serve each other in various ways. We already talked about this last week, but I'll remind you of this. Every member serves by being present in worship and praying for one another. Different members also serve in other ways, but every member is called to at least these two things: to worship together and to pray for one another.

I promised you last week that I would go into this a little more, and so I asked you to not get mad at me yet, and you didn't. I'll say a little bit more now, and when I'm all done, then I guess you have permission to get mad.

The question that looms over this, which has become especially relevant the last two years, is this: *How can we be the body of Christ if we're not actually together?* And the basic answer is, we can't. I'll add a little bit of nuance to that, but only a little, because nuance quickly becomes

ONE BODY (1 Corinthians 12:12-31a)

an excuse. Being a part of a body is not just about proximity. When you go home after church, you don't cease to be a part of this body. When you go on vacation or stay home because you are ill, you do not cease to be a part of this body. There are shut-ins who are literally incapable of attending worship, or for whom it would be extremely difficult. They are still a part of this body. And there are times, you might call them "waves," when it is wise for at-risk individuals to avoid gatherings. This is true. But we end up in a dark and unhappy place when we start to think of other humans as threats to our existence. And we might use risk as an excuse to neglect the habit of meeting together. This is pretty easy to examine: if you are comfortable going to a store, or a restaurant, or a hockey game, or pretty much any building with fifty other people, but you're not willing to go to church, that's a problem.

Now since I angered one side of you, it's only fair to anger the other side. As members of the same body, and even just as fellow human beings, we have a duty to care for and protect one another's physical wellbeing. This comes from the Fifth Commandment, "You shall not murder." The Small Catechism explains this by saying, "We should fear and love God so that we do our neighbor no bodily harm nor cause him any suffering, but help and befriend him in every need." Part of this could include being vaccinated. Maybe you were hoping I wasn't going to go there. You might be thinking, *You're a pastor, not a medical expert.* And you definitely have me on that one. I really can't explain to you how vaccines work, what the risks are, or exactly how much protection they offer. That's not my area of expertise. But most issues involve multiple areas of expertise. If one doctor says this, and another doctor says that, I can't tell you which one is right. But I can tell you that you're not free to pick whichever one you want to be right. And I can also tell you that the Fifth Commandment has to be part of the equation. There is a scientific component here, and there is a moral component. I'm not even going to try to tackle the scientific component, because I don't understand it. But there is a moral component. There's a moral component to just about everything. Part of your equation needs to consider the physical wellbeing of your family, neighbors, and fellow church members.

Then remember the Eighth Commandment. And this goes for everyone on every side of an issue. The Eighth Commandment is the one that says, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." And the Small Catechism explains this to include putting the most charitable construction on all that our neighbor does. We bear false witness against our neighbor when we project evil intentions on them. You might not understand why someone wears a mask. You might not understand why someone isn't vaccinated. You might not understand why someone goes to a birthday party. You might not understand why another person won't go out for church. Don't assume you understand their reasons. And definitely do not assume their reasons are evil. They might not understand what you understand, or you might not understand what they understand. As members of the same body, we actually have a responsibility to protect one another's reputations.

And we can be humble enough to recognize that we don't know everything. If there's anything we've learned in the last two years, it's that no one really knows what's going to happen next, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit excepted, of course. Viruses change. We discover new things. Nobody really wants to be nailed to the wall on something they said last week that turned out to be false. Politicians and commentators, do it all the time. They score points by finding the one bad thing a person said and rubbing their faces in it. That's the political game. But you're more mature than them. When we treat people that way in real life, it actually pushes them deeper into error. If we care about people, and if we want them to change their minds, we should make it easy for them to do so. Let them change their minds and save face.

ONE BODY (1 Corinthians 12:12-31a)

Now, I have to say that I think this congregation has really done a great job showing respect to one another, even those we disagree with. We've recognized that Covid response is not part of our confession of faith. Some of the Ten Commandments give us principles to follow, but a specific Covid response is not in our confession of faith. So we can disagree and debate over non-doctrinal points, and it doesn't affect our unity in doctrine and faith. I actually think you have done really well with this. It also seems to me that you have respected one another's space. If someone sits on the side of the church with social distancing, other members have respected that. You recognized that if we want people to attend worship, we need to help them feel safe here.

We are, after all, members of the same body. We need each other. Every other member is a gift to you, and you are a gift to them. When we sin against one another, we sin against our own body. And when we confess our sins to one another, and when we forgive one another, we are reconciling with our own body.

So we should examine ourselves. Have you sinned against this body? Have you sinned against individual members of this body? Confess your sin. Confess it to God. If you so desire, you may come for private confession. I will hear the confession you make before God and declare God's forgiveness to you. And "confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16).

This congregation is a gift to each of us through Jesus Christ. In this Christian Church, we receive forgiveness through the Word of God, through Baptism, and through the Lord's Supper. We are brought into fellowship with our Lord, Jesus Christ, and with one another. So use this gift and participate in this gift. This congregation is a gift to you through your Baptism in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.