

"Healthy Body – Healthy Church"
1 Corinthians 12:12-31

February 3: 2019

4th Sunday after the Epiphany

A very wise philosopher once said to me, "Getting old is not for sissies." I've heard that philosophy stated often because I happen to be married to that philosopher who expressed it. I'm sure all of you have heard a variation on this philosophy or have experienced it personally in your own lives. Growing old is not easy. As I am finding, when you grow old, the various members of your body – bones, muscles, organs, – begin to break down. They don't work as well as they use to and you slow down. Things stop working. When enough important members of your body cease to function at all, you die. I have found this to be true personally, not only by growing old, but with regard to the Parkinson's disease which I have. It does its damage by slowing down the members of my body so that I am able to do fewer and fewer things. It is likely that this disease, after slowing down many members of my body, will take my life.

In our text for today, St. Paul invokes a metaphor – a comparison – to help explain how the Church of Jesus Christ is to work and to succeed. Let's face it: our congregation has had problems in working together as a congregation of the Christian Church. Some of our members have carried a heavy burden of the ministry here while others have carried little or none of the burden. This has caused conflicts, hurt feelings, and, I believe, the departure of some people to other churches or to no church at all. However the worst problem it has caused is hindering us from living and serving together as Christians. St. Paul's message is one that we, at Peace Lutheran Church, need to hear, if we want our church to survive and thrive in the future.

Paul compares the Church with a body. He says that a body is composed of many different members, but only one body. A body does not create itself. Rather, God creates the body by His own power and mercy. He has placed all of the bones, muscles, and organs in precisely the proper place in order to have a healthy body. The body belongs to God and not to the individual members of the body.

In order to have a healthy body, all of the various members of the body must work and work together in performing their God-given tasks. When some parts of the human body are not doing their God given responsibility, the entire body suffers. When some parts of the human body try to do more than God has given them to do or things that God has not designed them to do, these members will burn out and the body will suffer. If enough do not do their God given responsibility or try to do what is not their God-given responsibility, the body will die.

What different kinds of members does the body have? St. Paul, in his teaching, allows members of the body to feel and to speak in order to further the metaphor and make his point. What if some body parts felt unimportant and lacking something if they could not do the important tasks of the body? Paul says, "if the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body, that does not disqualify him from belonging to the body. Similarly, 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.

What's Paul's point here? Simply because a part of the body does not do any of the big time functions like writing and holding or seeing, it is still part of the body. There are other things for those parts to do. Besides, if the whole body were an eye, how would the body hear? If the whole body were an ear, how with the body smell? But God has arranged the

members of the body, each one of them, as He chose. If every member was alike, many things would not get done.

There are also members of the body which are just the opposite. Some of our bodily members do very important things – like seeing, thinking, hearing, and so on. However, simply because they do important jobs does not mean they are superior to other parts of the body or that they don't need help. Paul says, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the hand to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" The smaller and seemingly less important members of the body still have their place in the body and their things to do for the body. They are not useless simply because they are weak.

In fact, Paul mentions that many of the unimportant members of the body are quite indispensable and those parts of the body which we consider to be weaker we honor even more than the so-called important members. Interpreters think that Paul is speaking of things such as sexual organs which are quite indispensable to propagating the human race and which we cover and take good care of.

This idea, Paul says, of a singular organism with a variety of parts which all contribute to the health and success of the organism, is just like the church of Jesus Christ. There is one body with Christ as the head, and many individual members which make up that body. To be members of the body of Christ would be a great honor and privilege. You and I are indeed members of the body of Christ. We share that great honor and great privilege. Yet neither you nor I nor anyone in the body of Christ deserves to be there. Our sinful rebellion cuts us off from Christ and does not allow us to be a part of His body. Instead, we are like amputated limbs or diseased organs which do not belong in a healthy body.

However, God, in His great mercy, sent Jesus to this earth in order to unite us with Him once again by paying the price to take away our sins. By offering His physical body on the altar of the cross as the sacrifice for sin. His sacrifice was complete and sufficient in order to take away the sin of the world which separated us. Jesus' resurrection from the dead proves that the sacrifice has been accepted by God and implemented among us to forgive our sins.

Now, instead of being just a bunch of isolated individuals, unable to cooperate and succeed, God joins us together in Christ's spiritual body. We were baptized into one body – that of Jesus Christ – regardless of our status in life. With Christ as our head, determining and directing our actions, we have become individual members of this body who together serve God and all people. Like a body, we can do nothing apart from the head, Jesus. And, like a body, the head (Jesus) can do nothing without a body to do his work.

Sometimes, we think of terms like "the body of Christ" to refer to only some Christians, not all Christians, and only those who have special and unique skills. That's not true at all. Just prior to our text, Paul says, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities but it is the same God empowers them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (Romans 12:4-7)

Notice what is being said here. Before we even consider how the members of the body of Christ are to work together and what they are to do, it is important to emphasize that every single member of the body of Christ has been given a gift, skill, or manifestation of the Holy Spirit. This is not for super Christians only. This is for all Christians. What skill or skills each Christian has is determined, not by the Christian or by a vote of the Voters' Meeting, but by the Holy Spirit Himself. And the purpose of these skills is not to serve self, but for the common good.

All skills are different. All ways of service are different. All activities done for the Lord are different. But there is one Lord, one goal, and one body. No one is inferior or superior

within the church. We are all members by grace and, while each of us is different in many ways, we are all the same in terms of our faith and our desire to serve the Lord.

This is not only comforting and reassuring, but it also cuts out a lot of excuses. Some people may feel that they have nothing to offer the ministry of Peace Lutheran Church, either because they are advanced in age, have a perceived lack of skill, no time, or some other reason. They may be too humble and feel they can do nothing important or they may be too self-centered and think they don't have to contribute to the ministry of the congregation but are here to simply soak up the ministry of others. As Paul said of the physical body parts who felt that, because they didn't or wouldn't do the seemingly big activities of the body, they were not part of the body, so it is with us. The fact that you believe you can't do anything important or you don't do anything like leaders in the congregation, this does not mean you are not a part of the body. You are.

The same holds true with the members of the body who do much of the work of ministry in the congregation. As in Paul's analogy about the body parts who did a lot of the work and felt they didn't need other weaker body parts, so it is with us. No member or group of members of the congregation can, unintentionally or deliberately, ignore or feel they don't need other members of the congregation. They can't carry out the entire ministry by themselves, nor should they try. Sadly, some people are willing to just sit back and let them do it or burn themselves out trying to do it.

The only way for a human body to remain healthy and alive is for all of its parts to be functioning in the way which God placed them in the body. This involves, not only the hands, feet eyes, ears, nose, but also the thyroid, the three little bones in the eardrum, the fingernails, and so on. All, not some, need to work, not individually, but together. Then, the body which God has designed, made, and empowered will be healthy and enjoy a long life.

The same is true in the body of Christ. For the body of Christ universally and the body of Christ here in this congregation to be healthy, growing, thriving, and living, all of its members are to be functioning in the way in which God has placed them here in this congregation. Those members who might be considered unimportant – unskilled, aged, children, weak, sick, homebound, and so on – are actually valuable and contributing members of the body of Christ. They may appear weak, but God has said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, they should not be made to feel that they are not a part of the body of Christ.

Those members who might be considered important – the leaders, the board members, the active members, those with special skills, and so on – cannot ignore or believe they have no need for the rest of the members. They cannot do all of the work of ministry themselves and, even if they did, it would not be right. The ministry of the body of Christ here would suffer. Instead, the stronger members are to involve and encourage those members who are not fully involved in the ministry of the congregation, whether because of feelings of inadequacy or selfishness, to use their gifts and skills in service of God's mission.. This is not simply to get more help, but to help them see their identity in the body of Christ.

For your body to live a healthy life, exercise all of your bodily members in the task of living. Neither neglect exercise nor simply exercise some of the parts (although some may need extra attention. For example, for my Parkinson's, I must do special exercises for special parts of the body. Do not favor the stronger parts of your body, nor neglect the weaker parts. This will damage or hurt the body. For example, Becky has problems with her back because she favored a bad knee. Finally, use all of the members of your body which God has given to you to serve others as He has designed for you to do. You may not be able to do hard labor, but you can do simple acts of service.

This is the same is true for the body of Christ in this place. All members are to be involved in the ministry of this congregation, using the gifts of grace given by God for the common welfare of our members and our community. Do not ignore or reject those who feel they can do nothing. Everyone has a place in the ministry and everyone has a part in it. Not all can serve on boards or do the heavy work of maintaining the churches facilities. Only some have that special skill. Other people can pray for the boards and committees, volunteer where able, or encourage those who do so. Do not try to do all of the work yourself. God has neither designed that be so nor has he giving you the skills to do that. Never have the attitude that there are some members of the body were not needed. Everyone is needed. Everyone has a part.

I've heard there is a big football game today. The Super Bowl will be matching the two best teams in the league: the New England Patriots and the Los Angeles Rams. Who will win? I can't say for sure (and since the Bears got knocked out of the playoffs, I don't really care) but I suspect that the team which plays together as a team, utilizing all of its individual players to perform all the tasks given to them will win. If any player tries to do too much or any player fails to do what is given to him, his team will likely lose the game. Will this congregation continue to survive and thrive in the future? I can't they say for sure, but I do care deeply about it. I do believe that, according to the Word of God, when every member of this congregation is involved in the ministry by using the gift or gifts given to him or her in the way God intended for them to be used, no members doing nothing because they do not feel a part of the body of Christ and no members trying to do everything because they feel they don't need the other members of the body of Christ, our congregation will not only survive, but will thrive for many years in the future. Amen.