

## “How to Be Church”

A Sermon for the People of Seaside Community Church

1 Corinthians 12: 12-27

February 21, 2010

First of all, I want to thank you for your kind reception of my remarks last Sunday. It would feel good to anyone, I suppose, to get the feedback you gave me. You gave me the sense that I had “hit the mark,” as they say in the theater! And your response to what I said means all the more because, frankly, I have often been told that I am somewhat of a “querky” person, that I don’t see things quite the way “most people” see things. And so, I’ve become used to people sort of cocking their heads to one side, quizzically, as I speak, wondering in themselves what on *earth* I am talking about!

So it was especially gratifying that, last week at least, you seemed to know what I was talking about!

Now, we’ll see about this week!

Because, you see, as we go through life, other people hold mirrors up for us, so we can see ourselves. We know this! Which of us has received a high school education and NOT had to memorize the Scottish poet, Robert Burns: “*would to God the gift he gee us to see ourselves as others see us*”? Or something like that... Only sometimes the mirror that others hold up for us to see ourselves in is not always the kind of “gift” that we want to receive! I mean, a great deal of our sense of ourselves comes from the reactions of others to us...

That is why, it is all the more gratifying to me, when I am well-received, by you...

What I hope we will see today is that *Paul* is trying to hold up a mirror to the people of the church at Corinth—but then, of course, also to us. And I hope we will be willing to receive the gift that Paul has to give us for how we might see ourselves in the mirror he is holding...

But first, I want to say something about the overall structure of the three sermons I am offering. I say, “three,” because, yes, I’ll be coming back next week as well...

You will remember that last week, I talked about our *feelings*, and how important it was to pay attention to and be able to express everything we are feeling during this time “in between” pastors. Well, this week, I’ll be asking us to look at our *thinking*, maybe to re-arrange how we *think* of ourselves as church. And next week, I’ll be aiming to talk about our *behavior*, what it means to *behave* as church.

OK, so there is feeling, thinking, and behaving, the three elements of our “emotional process” of our life together as church... Now, it you’ll want to know about what “emotional process” is—you’ll have to read my book! (HA!) You might have known I’d get a pitch for it in here somewhere, huh?

Anyway, today’s topic concerns how we *think* of ourselves as church. And since it involves “thinking,” I’m going to ask that, in a way, you help me preach this message. One reason for this is, well, lots of times people have told me that I preach “thought-provoking” sermons. This may sound like a compliment; maybe some of you have said

something similar to me, and even meant it as a compliment! And I used to take it as a compliment... Until it hit me one Sunday that maybe when people were saying that my sermons were *thought*-provoking, what they were really meaning was, that they were not “thinking” along with me, and they were only *feeling* provoked!

So right here at the beginning, I want us all to put our thinking caps on, and see if we can *think* together about what it means to be church-- in terms that we seldom use.

Specifically, those terms are about our bodies.

And most of us don't much like to think about our bodies.

Maybe we even come to church to forget about our bodies...

Yet here is Paul, in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, using a long extended reflection on our bodies to teach us what it means for us to think of ourselves as church as The *Body* of Christ.

Not the “spirit” of Christ or the “soul” of Christ or some other invisibility—but the *body* of Christ. Hmmm... Thought-provoking? Or only provoking?

I think maybe even the Corinthians might have found Paul's speech a little jarring. I mean, there he was going on for the first eleven verses of this chapter talking about “spiritual gifts”—just like I was last week—and all of a sudden, Paul holds up a mirror, and invites us to look in it! And what we see when we look in the mirror is not our “spiritual gifts,” but our bodies...

And I don't know about you, but I stopped looking at my body in the mirror a long time ago!

Paul's presumption is something along the lines that speaking about “spiritual gifts” might seem rather abstract to people, but speaking about bodies is both more concrete and more familiar to people. Paul presumes that we have at least a passing familiarity with our bodies, and how they work.

But there is this paradox: Paul is choosing for his analogy a reality that should be the most intimate and familiar to each of us. And yet, our bodies might be the one reality we pay the least attention to—unless it gives us trouble! Thus even though we all know that what Paul is doing here in chapter 12 is building an extended analogy—I think we have to begin by acknowledging that, by using our bodies, he's building upon a familiar yet uncomfortable experience we all have.

To teach us a *spiritual* lesson, Paul has us think about an experience we might not *want* to think about—the experience we have of our bodies.

Still, I hope today that together we'll think about at least four of the points Paul is trying to make, and then maybe one I think we ought to make ourselves.

The first point is that being “the body of Christ” means that we ought to come to accept and even expect that we will be a **diverse** group. We ARE many—yet we are “one” in Christ.

I think that this is important for us to think about because diversity is much more difficult for us to live with than uniformity. Don't you think we could pretty much make that statement across the board when it comes to groups or organizations, states or nations, or even cultures? Diversity is a lot more difficult for most people to live with than uniformity. Don't you think?

When I think about diversity vs uniformity I think about how well-meaning the Founding Fathers of our nation were in espousing that "all men are created equal"—but then how difficult it has been for us as a nation to live up to what that might mean. Like that "all men" might include *women*... And that "all men" might include those we now call "persons of color"... And then when we get to "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights"—well, we can see that equality in diversity is a lot more difficult to accomplish than equality in uniformity!

Yet, *diverse yet one*, is the *e pluribus unum* of the Body of Christ, Paul is saying. And necessarily so...

So when, in this interim, in-between period, we begin to think about what kind of church God is calling us to be, I think we will help ourselves if we factor in thoughts about increasing our diversity. If we follow Paul, then our life together as church will be blessed by being more diverse. We are helped in our thinking of what it means to be church to remember v14: "Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many."

This leads to Paul's second lesson, which has to do with "belonging." Now the way Paul speaks about "belonging" has to do with whether or how each of us feels about being members of this Body of Christ. That is, "belonging" has to do with our own inner thoughts and feelings about being here, being a part of..., "owning" our membership in this church.

Belonging is about more than affiliation, or membership in a card-carrying way. Belonging is a "felt-sense," along the lines of *participating* in this, our life together as church, in a way that feels right to us. Belonging means we feel like we fit and fit-in. We *belong* here, don't you think? Or maybe, some of us don't feel like we belong here?

It is this latter point that Paul makes. Within the many-yet-one of the Body of Christ, it can be easy for any of us to come to think that we don't belong. Especially in this in-between time, when things are happening-- or not!-- that effect our life together as church, we can come to feel excluded and wonder whether we belong.

What's interesting about Paul is, in his stress upon diversity, he rules out our thinking that we may not or do not belong! The foot cannot say because I am not a hand, I do not belong! The ear cannot say because I am not an eye, I do not belong! No, Paul is saying, because we are a "body," we *belong* together...

Why? Because God has so "arranged the body"... To me this means, God has brought us ALL here, at this time in the life of this congregation, to BE church together. All of us are important. Each of us belongs here. And because it is *God* who has brought us together, and arranged us as we are, we don't have the option of saying, "Because I am not..., I don't belong." No, each of us belongs, because God brought all

of us here. So each of us is to bring ourselves to bear, and our capacity for hearing, or seeing, or smelling... in our life together as church.

By the same token comes Paul's third point: we *need* each other. We *need* each other to be just the way we are. AND: we cannot say to any one else: "[we] have no need of you...".

I don't know any lesson that it is more important for us to learn as we endeavor to be church during this interim time, than this one. We *need* each other. We will help ourselves be church if we think about ways that we can express this sense that we need each other—so that no one thinks that they don't belong, so that no one comes to feel expendable or as if they are not needed.

For Paul's second and third lessons go together, don't they? "Don't be thinkin' that you don't belong, now!" he says on the one hand. And: "Don't be thinkin' that we need only some of us and not all of us," on the other.

This dual dynamic of including ourselves in and remembering that we need each and all of us might be the most difficult thing for us to wrap our minds around as we think together about what it means for us to be church.

I think that this is one of the reasons why Paul uses our bodies as the "base metaphor" for our thinking about who we are to be as church. And if we think about it, if the parts of our bodies were to behave the ways that Paul describes them here, it would be pretty funny, wouldn't it? What if parts of our bodies would begin to rebel, and to say to each other: "I don't want to belong to you." Or what if parts of our bodies were to say to other parts: "We have no need of you!" Just imagine! We'd be pretty uncoordinated in no time!

And if it were not so funny, it would be kind of sad. Metaphorically speaking, some of the illnesses to which our bodies fall prey come about because parts of our bodies behave in precisely the ways Paul describes.

For instance, the cancerous cells of the body are those that refuse to die. Cells dying and being replaced is what keeps our bodies healthy. When cells just sort of go off on their own and strive for a kind of personal immortality by refusing to die—they can threaten the life of the whole body. So cancer treatment tries to kill them, or cut them out. Cancer is as if a part of our body said, "I don't belong to the body."

Or which of us, in injury, have not discovered just how much we *need* certain parts of our body? Haven't you experienced a time in your life when a part of you has been incapacitated, and while it was healing, you had to compensate or make do?

So for all of us, the health of the whole body of Christ, depends upon our remembering that we *belong* here because God has brought us together, and that we need each other, in order to be the Body of Christ God intended us to be.

Paul's final point has to do with our respect for and honoring of one another. He makes a rather remarkable statement in verses 24b and 25:

**But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.**

I suspect that we get the next statement, v. 26: that when one member suffers, all suffer together with it; and if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. I mean, if you've ever had back pain, you know how the whole body suffers with one's back. Likewise, we've just seen how, in the Olympics, body parts are not honored for their achievements, but rather the whole body gets to rejoice and be honored.

But the notion of "greater honor to the inferior member" in order that the body lack "dissension" and that all members show "the same care" for one another.... This is another way of thinking about our life together as church which may need some examining... For none of us likes to think of any of us as "inferior." But maybe we sometimes feel not *strong* enough to contribute as we want to our life together as church.

Or going the other way, I wonder how it is for us, when, in the course of our life together as church, we experience disagreement or dissension. When people disagree with us, do we have a sense of them as "inferior"? If so, it is precisely then that Paul is saying that we need most to "honor" and "respect" the other... Maybe *that* is how the "same" care is brought to bear.

I don't know, of course. I'm just thinking out loud here. And I hope you are still thinking along with me!

Finally, I have another thought I want to add to what Paul is saying.

When we look in the mirror at our bodies, how *old* a body do we see?

I know, it is funny question. Let me just speak for myself. When I was a teenager, mirrors were very important to me. I used them to track my progress, my growth into adulthood. I would look in them and see myself getting older—and I was glad.

But the older I got, the less attention I paid to myself when I looked in the mirror. I didn't want to track my aging! So in terms of my awareness of myself, I aged in "spurts"—I didn't want to see myself getting older by the day, so there would be these times of "sudden" awareness of myself as older! My goodness, I didn't realize that I was *that* bald! My goodness, I didn't realize I was *that* wrinkled! My goodness, I didn't realize that I was *that* paunchy! That is how it has been for me for the last, maybe thirty or forty years of my life. Maybe some of you have had to make similar adjustments in your thinking about yourselves? Maybe it gets better as we get older? Do we ever get used to aging?

Anyway, here's my point: This in-between time is an excellent time for us to be looking in the mirror. If Paul tells us we are to be the Body of Christ, we can ask ourselves: **How have we, as the Body of Christ, aged?**

Here's where it might be helpful to us to think of ourselves a little differently than maybe we have in the past. Is it possible for us to think of ourselves as a Body of Christ—that has gone past the sense of aging?

I'm just asking...

This is my impression: Most of us came to be Christians when we were young. At the time that I became a Christian, the Church was maybe not as culturally and racially diverse as it is now—but it was a lot more diverse in terms of people's ages. The Body of Christ I became a member of, had people of all ages, well-distributed through the congregation.

Nowadays, it is no surprise to us to find that the medium age of Protestant congregations throughout the United States has increased. I think the last survey I saw measured it at somewhere in the mid-60's... The Body of Christ has gotten older!

Our congregation is not unlike that. We have gotten older too...

And our worship on Sunday morning reflects that. Most of us grew up with a liturgy like the one we use. And the basic elements of this liturgy go back many generations before we were born. It is an old liturgy, for an aged Body of Christ.

I think one of the challenges facing us at this time in our life together as church is to re-think what it means to BE church in this new, 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Merely to think that we might somehow perpetuate a way of being church that has been fine for us, as it was for our parents before us and their parents before them, is likely to be a mistake. Instead, this is the perfect time for us to think together about how we are to be church, less out of the past and more into the future of our life together as church...

In a way, this entails our looking into the mirror that Paul holds up and seeing the Body of Christ *differently*. If we are to be a vital congregation for years to come, then we must begin to think of ourselves differently than we likely do now. Theologically, what this means is that we might begin to imagine *our* bodies, and thus our expression of the Body of Christ, as **resurrect-able**.

Probably, when it comes to our life together as church we think more in terms of "repetition" than "resurrection." So we think about what aspects of our life together will be "repeated" as we go through this in-between time. But the Bible does not proclaim repetition. The Gospel is a proclamation of resurrection.

Do we believe in "the resurrection of the boy," as the Apostle's Creed instructs us to?

In the middle of the last century there was a New Testament scholar named Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann was fond of saying that Jesus came and was incarnated and then was crucified, died and was buried. But Jesus rose as the Christ into the Church!

Maybe Christ needs to rise into the Church again. Maybe Christ needs to rise into the Church again and again. And maybe it is time for Christ to rise into this church again!

Can we begin to think of ourselves differently? Can we begin to think of how we might *be* church together in a way that propels us forward, into the century we are in? Can we look in the mirror that Paul holds up, and see ourselves incarnating a *resurrected* Body of Christ? And if we see the Resurrection incarnated in the Body of Christ, might we begin to believe in the resurrection of our own bodies? And thus, as the Apostle's Creed would say, "the life everlasting"...

Those are the challenges to our thinking that I see God proposing to us at the present time. And it is in order to think together about our life together as church, that God has brought us together, and arranged us as God has.

V27: **Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it!**

Amen.