



ME-or-WE? TouchPoint for January 23, 2019

1 Corinthians 12:12-31 [The Message]

You can easily enough see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts—limbs, organs, cells—but no matter how many parts you can name, you're still one body. It's exactly the same with Christ. By means of his one Spirit, we all said good-bye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which he has the final say in everything. (This is what we proclaimed in word and action when we were baptized.) Each of us is now a part of his resurrection body, refreshed and sustained at one fountain—his Spirit—where we all come to drink. The old labels we once used to identify ourselves—labels like Jew or Greek, slave or free—are no longer useful. We need something larger, more comprehensive.

I want you to think about how all this makes you more significant, not less. A body isn't just a single part blown up into something huge. It's all the different-but-similar parts arranged and functioning together. If Foot said, "I'm not elegant like Hand, embellished with rings; I guess I don't belong to this body," would that make it so? If Ear said, "I'm not beautiful like Eye, limpid and expressive; I don't deserve a place on the head," would you want to remove it from the body? If the body was all eye, how could it hear? If all ear, how could it smell? As it is, we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it.

But I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a part of. An enormous eye or a gigantic hand wouldn't be a body, but a monster. What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its proper place. No part is important on its own. Can you imagine Eye telling Hand, "Get lost; I don't need you"? Or, Head telling Foot, "You're fired; your job has been phased out"? As a matter of fact, in practice it works the other way—the "lower" the part, the more basic, and therefore necessary. You can live without an eye, for instance, but not without a stomach. When it's a part of your own body you are concerned with, it makes no difference whether the part is visible or clothed, higher or lower. You give it dignity and honor just as it is, without comparisons. If anything, you have more concern for the lower parts than the higher. If you had to choose, wouldn't you prefer good digestion to full-bodied hair?

The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don't, the parts we see and the parts we don't. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance.

You are Christ's body—that's who you are! You must never forget this. Only as you accept your part of that body does your "part" mean anything. You're familiar with some of the parts that God has formed in his church, which is his "body":

*apostles
prophets
teachers
miracle workers
healers
helpers
organizers
those who pray in tongues.*

But it's obvious by now, isn't it, that Christ's church is a complete Body and not a gigantic, unidimensional Part? It's not all Apostle, not all Prophet, not all Miracle Worker, not all Healer, not all Prayer in Tongues, not all Interpreter of Tongues. And yet some of you keep competing for so-called "important" parts. But now I want to lay out a far better way for you.

Grace and Peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

"For there is one body, but many parts. Now you are the Body of Christ and members of it."

I don't know if there is an easy way to ease into this one. It is a two-fold assault on 'American Christianity.' It attacks both the 'American' and the 'Christianity' of 'American Christianity.' It cuts at the heart of our society, our nation, our western civilization.

This passage at **its** core, is saying that we are **not** individuals at **our** core. We are relational beings. Our meaning, being, and identity is always found in relation to another, to others. Or, as Kierkegaard once wrote as only he could, **"The self is not a self."**

The person growing up in the western world identifies him or herself from the phrase, "I think therefore I am." Which is about the most narcissistic, self-centered definition of a person that can exist. Because in that sentence, I am the subject, my activity is the verb, and I am even the object. And because I am an individual, I have certain individual rights that have been endowed to me by my creator. Individual rights that I can claim over and against you. This is all according to our national sacred writing, which for many is inerrant and infallible.

But what Paul is telling us is that as Christians, we don't have individual rights, we have communal responsibilities. For there is one body, but many parts and you are members of it. *"If one member suffers, all suffer together with it."*

Or as Jesus said, *"Love your neighbor **AS YOURSELF**".* Not "as much" as yourself, but "as" yourself. You and your neighbor are one. It's not about the individual, it's about the community. It's not about rights, it's about responsibilities. I challenge you to go look up in the Bible and find where it says we have INDIVIDUAL rights and where it lists what those individual rights are. We don't have RIGHTS! We have RESPONSIBILITIES! *"If one member suffers, all suffer together with it." "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

And we have those responsibilities because we are all connected. That is the starting point. That is our foundation. A biblical person would identify him or herself this way, "I am connected to, therefore I am." My identity is a gift from others and I gift others with their identity. It is within our relationships that we are fed and nourished and given identity.

Now I realize that 'all things are possible with God,' so within that caveat I am going to say as unequivocally as possible, you cannot grasp this passage, nor can it grasp you within the framework of a western civilization, "I think therefore I am" mindset. You just can't get there from here.

Look, if, as a father of a family, one thought that the family existed solely for his own sake and benefit, that family would fall apart, shutdown. If, as the owner of a company, one thought the business existed solely for her sake and benefit, that company would fall apart, shutdown. If, as the leader of a country, one thought that the government existed solely for his own sake and benefit, that government would fall apart. That government would shut down. I'm speaking hypothetically of course.

Think of the cells of our body. They work together, in harmony for the sake of the whole. So what do we call a cell that decides to be an individual and not work with other cells? What do we call a cell that sees the others cells as existing for itself. That's called a cancer cell, folks.

Look, when a body part separates itself from the body, it dies. When a branch separates itself from the vine, it dies. When God created humanity, God created them male and female in the first creation story and in the second one Adam was not complete until Eve was created. The concept of the 'individual' is not a concept that scripture understands. *"Love your neighbor as yourself."*

For there is one body, but many parts and you are members of it. If you understand this concept then maybe you can understand the words of Father Thomas Keating when he says, *"The one thing that separates us from God is believing we are separate from God."*

Or maybe you can understand what former bishop of the Episcopal church, Katherine Jefferts Schori, meant when she said in 2009, *"The great Western heresy is that we can be saved as individuals, that any of us alone, can be in a right relationship with God...that individualist focus is a form of idolatry, for it puts me and my words in the place that only God can occupy, at the center of existence, as the ground of being."* That got her in a lot of trouble by the way, as if you couldn't have guessed that.

St. Paul tries to get at much the same thing a few chapters before our passage today when he says that the unbelieving spouse and unbelieving children of a believer will be saved, because of their connection to the believer.

And finally, Dante's *Inferno* tries to get at the same idea but from a reverse angle. In Dante's *Inferno*, the lowest level of Hell, the worst level of Hell, is not fire and brimstone, but ice, a frozen lake where everyone is frozen and stuck and cannot communicate, relate or connect with anyone else. Everyone there has achieved the height of individuality, isolated and alone, and it IS HELL.

"For there is one body, but many parts... and you are members of it." Therefore, one cannot say to another, you don't belong. You are not a part of Christ. We have tried to reduce the life of faith to an individual level, a private level, and Paul will have nothing of it. Yes, one's life of faith is personal, hopefully, deeply personal, but it is not private and individual.

But it isn't just our reduction of faith to a private and individual space that is attacked here. Our concept of the Christ is attacked as well. In American Christianity, we have not just reduced our faith to something private and individual, we have reduced our concept of the Body of Christ as well. We believe it pertains only to a group of believers. Our collective belief is what creates the Body of Christ. "We believe; therefore the Body of Christ is."

But Paul speaks of the Christ as existing from the beginning of creation. He writes in Colossians, "In Christ, all things in heaven and earth were created; all things have been created through Christ and for Christ; in Christ all things hold together." And then this from Paul, "Christ is all and in all."

Let me repeat that for you: "Christ is all and in all."

To paraphrase Richard Rohr, "If 'Jesus' is the name for the marriage of the divine and the creation at a specific time and place in history, then 'Christ' is the name for the marriage of the divine and the creation throughout all eternity." And therefore, the body of Christ is not limited to a collection of believers but is present in and through all of creation. "Christ" is not Jesus' last name. But something much bigger.

For there is one creation, but many parts and you are all members of it.

For there is one body, but many parts and you are members of it.

For there is one Christ, but many parts and you are members of it.

They all say the same thing. Therefore, one cannot say to another, you don't belong. You are not a part of the creation, the body, the Christ.

Isn't that what we are saying in this meal? We say that the Christ is present in this bread and wine. In the ordinary elements of food and drink, broken and shared with others, we experience the Divine, the Mystery, the Christ. In the relationship of ourselves with the earth and its fruits, in the relationship of ourselves with others, we experience the Divine, the Mystery, the Christ.

This meal is our 'Jesus'—the marriage of the divine and creation at a specific time and place in history, so we can experience the 'Christ' in every meal and in every encounter with another.

To repeat a quote from my brother I used last week, "This meal is the assurance of what is." This meal is the assurance that the Christ is present in all of our encounters, our plain, ordinary, daily encounters. It is not just limited to this meal and this place.

Now you know why Luther was mocked when he insisted on the Real Presence of the Christ in this meal. People laughed at him and said, "If Christ is really present in the bread and wine than you might as well say he is present in the cabbage soup at the local pub." To which Luther supposedly replied, "Yes, exactly." And he could have just as well have added, "and not just in the cabbage, but in the guy and the gal sitting next to me and eating and drinking with me."

Look, the idea of the 'Real Presence' in the meal isn't about a belief system. It is about an experience, a connection—a 'soul connection' to use the words of my friend Alan Nohre. It is a 'soul connection' with the presence of the Christ **in the earthly elements** of food and drink; and the presence of the Christ **in those next to me** and the presence of the Christ **in me**.

The Real Presence is not a noun or a doctrine, it is a verb and an experience in every time and in every place, in every person and every encounter. For "*Christ is all and in all.*"

For there is one creation, but many parts and you are all members of it.

For there is one body, but many parts and you are members of it.

For there is one Christ, but many parts and you are members of it...*along with everyone else.*

Amen.