

January 24, 2010/Season after Epiphany/David L. Edwards

One Body, Many Members

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

*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.*

If there is a "golden text" for the Church of the Covenant community, it is the twelfth chapter of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Our vision has been that the "church" is a community of persons who are discovering themselves as gifted and called by God to serve the community itself, or our city and the wider world in a diversity of ways. For us, "church membership" means being woven into a dynamic (*dunamis* -- spirit filled, energized, led) community of persons who are living their lives as a journey of faith, individually and together.

Paul describes Jesus' community as an organism, not a machine or an institution or a structure. It is a living body. Just like our bodies, it has and needs many different members, each having its gift and calling, its place and its work to do. The body could not fully function without each and every member. No member is more important than another. No work that a member does is less important than that of another. What we might consider the least important or impressive member is given the greatest honor. This is how God's spirit works within a community so that it becomes Christ's body, the manifestation of Jesus in the world. The church as the body of Christ is a servant community of gifted and called persons, committing themselves to their own spiritual awakening and growth--the inward journey--and to service in and for the world that God made--the outward journeys of faith.

The Church of the Covenant has always tried to take this stuff seriously. I don't know whether or not we have succeeded as well as we might, or as well as we sometimes THINK we have. But it is the vision of our community, and in my seven years with you, I think it works pretty well, and is for me the most vibrant and life-giving vision of the church that I know of. However, we always need to refresh our awareness and understanding of these things. If we think we already know what this is all about, and have settled in our thinking, we probably have lost touch with the reality of it. I have learned how easy it is to talk beautifully about this vision of the church, but not be actually LIVING it. We always need to refresh our understanding, examine honestly where we are, and be willing to let go of the past in order to BE this kind of community now, today, in the present.

Paul says that the body is one and yet many. Unity and diversity go together. Paul is arguing against some in the Corinthian community who want everyone to conform to THEIR way of thinking, THEIR idea of what the church should be and be doing. They want sameness, conformity. Little groups had crystallized around particular persons, probably the person who had baptized them. Loyalties were focused on persons and personalities, not Jesus and the life to which he called people. A group had even formed around Paul, which irritated him greatly! Being Jesus' community is not about attachments to persons, even extraordinarily good and spiritual persons. That only ends up in factionalism. And it distracts us from God's call in our own lives, to be persons who are working with our own discipleship to Jesus in the uniqueness of our own lives.

God creates the community of Jesus as a dynamic diversity of persons and callings and gifts. We cannot control it, and if we try to do so, we stop the movement of God's spirit. Our work is to encourage and help each other discover what our gifts and callings are, what we are meant to do with our lives, and for each of us to be as attentive and faithful as we can be to what God has called and gifted us to do. The community of Jesus only works when there is diversity, not uniformity. Our unity is the spirit of God that gives birth to this diversity of lives and gifts and callings.

Then Paul talks about how this organism of Jesus' community is to function, how the members are to view and relate to one another. The foot cannot say because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body. Neither can the ear say, because I am not an eye, I do not belong. What this says to me is: Quit measuring your life by someone else's! Stop comparing yourself and your worth to others. For whatever reasons, some of us grow up not loving or owning our own lives. We are always looking at other people and who they are and what they are doing. Others seem so much more important than we feel we are, more attractive or accomplished. The

things they do seem to matter so much more than what we do. Paul throws all of that overboard. Stop comparing. Comparison prevents us from giving attention to the movement of God's spirit in our own lives. Each member, each person is essential to the body. Being who we are as God made us, in all our uniqueness, our strengths and weaknesses, our wholeness and our woundedness, is exactly what is needed by the community, and the world.

This is why I have never liked the "saint system" in the church. Not just in the Catholic Church, but in all churches. You know, when we lift up spiritual heroes and laud the wonderful things that certain people have accomplished. Ministers. Missionaries. Social activists. And so forth. We have our own roster of saints, those who have moved out to established various missions. This is great. However, I have realized that this has exactly the opposite effect from what is intended. It is supposed to inspire us, but it actually tends to discourage us and distract us from the importance of our own life and how we live it. Maybe the lives of others can inspire us. But in the end, it is our own life that we need to affirm and live in response to God's call in Christ. So we need to be aware of our tendency to compare ourselves with others and to abandon the gift of our own lives. That awareness will begin to liberate us to be who God made us to be and to do what God calls us to do.

Paul now says, What if the whole body were an eye, or an ear? If everyone were doing the same thing, everything else would NOT be getting done. Again, Paul is challenging those who would make the community conform to their idea of what it should be. We have this temptation here, too. It is understandable. We get deeply committed to what we feel called to do, and it becomes so important to us and, we believe, to the world, that we think everyone else should be doing what we are doing.

Let's put Paul's words in the context of our community. If the whole community were L'Arche Blue Ridge Mountains, where would The Haven be? If the whole community were the St. Francis Mission Group, where would The Festival Center be? If the whole community were The Haven, where would Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center be? The ministries that have grown out of our community are the work of God's spirit in the lives of persons responding to a particular call and need with the gifts that God gives them. Some arise and become established and stand on their own and continue. Others emerge for a time and, for whatever reasons, dissolve. But I think the community is clear that each ministry or mission must be rooted authentically in the life of a person and that person's sense of call. Then that person and the group that forms around the mission goes to work bearing full responsibility for the mission. The expectation cannot be, however, that the whole community will join in that mission or ministry. Support, yes. Sometimes financial, always prayerful.

I remember when I was sharing with the Covenant Members and others about the vision of the Festival Center nearly seven years ago. I was so excited about it. Things were coming together. And yet, I always felt what I could only describe as a kind of "reserve" on the part of others who had been through these things many times. I wanted everyone to get on board and be excited. Indeed, others were excited about it. But the reserve I sensed had to do with this thing of one member not expecting the whole body to become like it! We need to be deeply and clearly committed to our own particular call, while recognizing, respecting, and rejoicing that others have their callings, their work.

Then Paul says that the members of the body suffer with and rejoice in one another. If one member suffers, all suffer. If one is honored, all rejoice. It occurred to me this week that this helps us overcome our self-centeredness. It liberates us from the small self to allow the larger Self to emerge, the Self that is interconnected with others. If we can step beyond our own concerns to give attention to the suffering of another, we experience a broadening and widening of our spirits. If we can rejoice with one who is being honored, who is experiencing a particular joy or accomplishment, then we are liberated from jealousy and the whole competition approach to life. A story came to mind as I read this verse one day this week. A group of Tibetan monks was touring the U.S. While in the Midwest, they had the opportunity to take a hot air balloon ride. There was some embarrassment when they arrived for their adventure. It had not been made clear that there was room in the gondola for only one person, and their schedule allowed time for only one ride. So they decided among themselves which one would go up in the air. As the balloon rose up, the others were asked if they were disappointed that they could not go. Oh no, they replied. He goes for all of us! Isn't that wonderful! Such freedom!

Something else has become very clear to me lately about the importance of the diversity of members and their gifts and callings. It seems hard for us to remain focused on and committed to the work that we are given. There are always many needs, some very urgent, that pull at our compassion and our desire to serve the world. And there are also many interesting and exciting things for us to get into. What is rare, I am finding, is that

depth of commitment and focus that stays with one's sense of call and one's gifts over the long haul. When we know what God has given us to be and do, and are committing ourselves to it, and arranging our lives around it, we need to cultivate the peace of mind and heart to say no to what is NOT ours. Otherwise we go hopping from one thing to another, never going deeper either into our own life or the thing God has called us to do and to give. This is not to say that there are not times when a need arises to which we all must respond in some way. But even then, our spiritual work is to perceive how we can respond to that need within our own gifts and callings.

And one last thing. I think it is true that one way to look at our lives is to see where God's call and the gifts God has given us touch some need in the world. Sometimes it is a particular need that evokes in us the call and gifts to respond with our lives. But it is also true that if each of us is truly discerning God's call and gifts in our own lives, and getting closer and closer to living out of our call and gifts, then we WILL BE MEETING some need in the world and in other people. What I am saying is that the gift that we are and the gifts that we have each been given, and the work we feel deeply called to do at any given time, is exactly what the world needs most from us.