

Epiphany 3 (C)
January 24, 2010
Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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Last week, on one of the afternoons when it wasn't raining, I went out in the back yard to throw a football with the kids. It felt good to be outside. It felt good to move, to fill my lungs with fresh air. I enjoyed the feel of the ball spinning off my fingertips as I threw, and feeling the sharp slap of the ball into my hands when I caught it, to feel every movement as graceful and smooth and strong. It made me think what an amazing and wonderful thing it is to have a body.

It's not always wonderful, though. When I was 12 or 13, I broke my arm, and I can still remember the shock of seeing my arm bent where it shouldn't have been, and it really hurt. And it's not just injuries, but also illness and age that reveal some of the limitations that come with having a body, and what happens when our bodies aren't working quite like we think they should. I remember one of our beloved elders here—her name was Florence. She used to say, "Getting old isn't for sissies." Sometimes our bodies feel anything but graceful and strong. It's almost like they "betray us"—when they don't work quite right.

In one of our scripture readings for today, St. Paul wrote about bodies. And he had in mind bodies that are graceful and strong, and bodies that aren't, bodies that aren't working quite like they should. St. Paul was writing to the church in the Greek city of Corinth. It was a church that he himself had founded. It was a community with a lot of gifted people. And yet, it was always sort of Paul's "problem child." It was a community that didn't "play well together." They were overly competitive with each other. And that seems to have been part of a problem with factions, and some treating others poorly.

So Paul used the image of a body to try to help them see themselves in a new way. They were one body together—and not just any body, but the body of Christ. By the goodness and love of God, they had all been made part of one body, the living presence of Jesus in the world as a community of people. In this body God has brought together, and overcome, all of the differences that keep people apart in the rest of the world—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, women or men, rich or poor, black or white, gay or straight. In the body of Christ it doesn't matter what your ethnicity is, your gender, your social status, or anything else. In the body of Christ God has made room to include everyone. In the body of Christ, all are not alike. There are all sorts of members of the body of Christ, who come from all sorts of backgrounds, with all sorts of perspectives, and are gifted with all sorts of abilities.

There's something interesting about the translation of this passage that we have in our bulletin. We read, "the body does not consist of one member but many." And because of the way the English word, "member," can function, it's easy enough for us to think of something like membership in an organization. But the word Paul uses could just as easily be translated as "limb" or "body part." You are the limbs of Christ's body—Christ's hands and feet, arms and legs, eyes and ears. You aren't just individuals who have made a decision to participate in a congregation. You are the body parts of Christ's living presence in the world! It is a gift of God's Spirit that our lives are connected in a profoundly significant way.

To the church in Corinth Paul wanted to emphasize that in Christ's body every part is needed. There is no body part that can say to any other body part, "You just aren't needed here." But also, no body part can say, "I'm not like that part, so I don't belong to the body." Every limb, every body part belongs to the body. The body isn't whole if some parts have withdrawn, or aren't able to participate, because every part, every limb, has its own proper function, its own particular gift.

And here's the thing Paul wants the church to see—God has brought us together and made us one body together for a purpose. The body of Christ is the living presence of Jesus in the world, so that Jesus can continue the same work he's always been up to, the work he speaks of in our Gospel passage for today—bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free, proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. Jesus can't do these things as a disembodied spirit. It requires a body to reach out with love. It takes a body with hands to touch, to feed, to embrace. It takes a body with strong arms to lift and carry, to bring help. It takes a body with ears to listen and care. It takes a body with eyes to watch out for those who are vulnerable, to attend to those in need.

And what Paul wrote to the church in Corinth so long ago is true for us today. You are the body of Christ, and individually you are Christ's limbs, Christ's hands and feet, arms and legs, eyes and ears. And God's Spirit has given every one of you gifts to be part of Christ's ongoing work of love for the world. And Christ's body is so much bigger than our congregation. You are part of a body that reaches around the world, a body with millions of hands and millions of feet. And it takes just such a body to be able to bring assistance in Haiti while also serving lunch every day for seniors in our Fellowship Hall, while also feeding our own families day by day. It takes just such a body to nurture faith in the children of this congregation while also bringing drinkable water to villages in Nicaragua, and listening with understanding to a friend who is troubled, and building houses with Habitat for Humanity, and knitting prayer shawls for friends who are ill.

People of God, you are the body of Christ. Each of you is a physical extension of the living presence of Christ, and you are all vitally connected to each other to be a community that is able to make a difference in the world. And God has given you such an amazing variety of gifts, and there is a place where every gift is able to contribute to the compassionate, life-giving, healing, renewing, forgiving, reconciling work of Jesus—in our work together as well as in your home, your family, your circle of friends, your neighborhood, your job. Together, we are the body of Christ making a difference in our city, our state, our country, our world. Perhaps there are times when the parts of this body don't work as well together as we might wish. But this body—this body of Christ—it is graceful and strong in every work of love. And it is beautiful. Thanks be to God. Amen