

Celebrating, feasting, delighting
Epiphany 3C, 1 Corinthians 12:12–31; Luke 4:14-21

“For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.”

One body. One Christ. One Spirit. There are many members. Through the millennia, there are more members, more human beings, than we can count. But there is one body. One Christ. One Spirit.

Paul uses this image of the body and members of the body not only here, but in Romans, as well. These words from Romans 12 are quite similar. “For as we have many members in one body...so we, many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.” Perhaps he wrote about it so much because he understood that the new humanity that Jesus gives birth to is so counter to human instincts and impulses that it’s hard for us to hear. For all the years that Christians have been hearing these words, it sure doesn’t seem like we are living as though we’re members of one body, one Christ, one Spirit. Humpty Dumpty seems like a more apt image!

My sense is that we relate to Paul’s words about one body, one Christ, one Spirit as metaphor. We don’t think we’re *really* one body. Perhaps particularly in the West, where we have a strong sense of individual identity, we’re pretty sure that we’re individuals first and foremost, biologically and literally separate and apart from each other. Our egos work hard to keep us under the illusion that we’re completely independent, self-contained, self-sufficient, autonomous creatures. So when we hear Paul say that we’re members of one body, one Christ, one Spirit, we’re likely to think that he’s speaking figuratively, that he’s

using the body metaphorically, that collectively human beings are *like* one body. Or that we're being given membership into a club, a club which exists on its own, which we can choose to join, where we choose to go to, choose when and how to participate.

But that isn't what Paul is saying. He isn't speaking in metaphor. And he isn't inviting us into an exclusive club of some sort. He's saying that we, many human beings, that we *are* the body of Christ, literally.

We sure don't live as one body. Quite the contrary. Through the ages we (we the church) have been arguing about who can be part of the body and who can't. In so many ways, in different times and places we hear the eye saying to the hand, "I have no need of you." And the head saying to the feet, "I have no need of you." We hear the leg saying to nose, "Because you don't look like me and function like me, "I have no need of you." The shoulder saying to the neck, "You don't behave in the same way as I do...I don't need you." And the hips writing a position paper to the belly, "Your understanding and belief is wrong...I don't need you." Or the body parts of the upper torso voting together on whether or not they are in agreement with the practices of the lower torso.

In the history of the church, the many members of the one body aren't doing a great job of following Paul's teaching. Instead, we follow Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5, "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell."

The problem with collapsing these two Scriptures and letting Jesus trump Paul is that they're talking about two different things. Jesus is talking about the members of a singular body. He's talking literal body parts. And Paul is talking about the body of Christ that is one

body, a literal collective. I wonder if we choose to use these words of Jesus because they fit into our default way of being human, a way of being that is continually judging and measuring others, a way of being that's limited by the need to be right and good, a way of being that's in competition with others. A way of being because we're afraid that God's love and goodness is limited, and we want to make sure we have a portion of it before it runs out.

But that isn't the Good News that Jesus proclaimed. That isn't the God that Jesus shows us, not at all. Nor did Paul. Paul very well knows those former ways of being human. And Paul understands the diversity and complexity of human beings. So he's explicit: we don't get to choose the human beings who make up the one body. That's God's doing. By design, God mixes it up, giving as much diversity in appearance and purpose and practice as there is diversity and complexity in appearance and function in our individual bodies. V 18, "But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body just as God pleased." And from v 24, "God blended the body, having given greater value to that part which is without."

Paul speaks directly to the ways we instinctively judge and categorize people, separating ourselves from each other. Listen again to vv 22-26:

²²Those members of the body which *seem* to be powerless or morally weak are necessary. ²³ And those members of the body which *appear* to be to be dishonored or unworthy, these we wrap with greater honor; and our unsuitable and shameful parts we wrap with gracefulness and elegance, ²⁴ while our honorable and suitable parts have no need. But God fit together the body, having given greater honor to that part which is without, ²⁵ that there should be no divisions in the body, but that the members should be anxious for one another. ²⁶ And if one member suffers, all the members suffer; or if one member is praised, all the members rejoice.

In many ways, Paul's message here is the same message that Jesus read from the scroll at the synagogue in Nazareth as he was beginning his ministry. He read the words from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because GOD has anointed me to bring

good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” The captives, the blind, the oppressed, these are the ones Paul is saying are already part of the one Christ, one body, one Spirit. It appears to us that they are less than the rest of us. The vulnerable and the excluded are ones we judge to be powerless and of lesser value. Some we might identify as weak, even morally weak, or perhaps morally wrong. Neither Jesus nor Paul is saying that the parts who think they are strong and honorable are responsible to take care of other members. Rather, in the year of Jubilee, in the time of Sabbath, those distinctions are removed. The powerful are lowered and the lowly are lifted up.

In the one body, one Spirit is breathing us. And we are all—with all our differences and distinctions and ways of being and ways of practicing—we are all equally part of Christ. And just as our body parts are fit together for the purpose of an individual body having life, so the one body is fit together to be the body and life of Christ in the world. We aren't here to argue about who has the right belief or practice. Nor is our purpose to have the right interpretation of the Bible. The purpose of the one body is to make flesh the resurrected Christ. And that happens when the one Spirit is breathing the breath of Love, of Light, of Life into us, as a collective.

When Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah, he left out part of the reading. He stopped with the words, “to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” The actual verse in Isaiah reads, “To proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, *and the day of vengeance of our God.*” With his reading, Jesus makes clear what he's about: Jesus, the Word-of-God-made-flesh is here to reveal and to proclaim one God, one God who is love. Love without vengeance. Jesus reveals, again and again, that it is our vengeance that needs to elevate some and diminish others. It is our vengeance that wants to judge and argue and take positions. It is our

vengeance that wants to separate ourselves from each other, making some members disposable. But when we give ourselves to living in the one body, when we are born into resurrection living, we let go of our need for vengeance. When we give ourselves to being breathed by the one Spirit, we stop judging and arguing and taking positions. Because we are all, every part, every body, living in the year of the Lord's favor. We are all, every body, every part, abundantly and gratuitously loved by one God.

We are all, every body, every creature, all of creation, living in the time of Sabbath. The year of the Lord's favor is characterized by love, mercy, grace. In all of our living, all of our relationships, all our actions and interactions, we trust God to be God. In the year of Jubilee, we don't have to figure out how all the different beliefs and convictions and practices work together in the body of Christ; we simply trust the perfection of God's creative Word, the perfection of God's design. Jesus didn't come to make us all alike; rather, he came to reconcile us as we are, with all of our differences, all our diversity. Jesus reveals what God's love and mercy and abundance look like. Paul isn't asking us to be the same in order to be the one body; rather, that God has perfectly designed humanity and creation. And we are one. He recognizes and names different purposes and functions and practices, all essential for the one body of Christ. We simply let the one Spirit breathe in us, filling us with one Life. With the one Spirit we breathe into the parts and members that are broken, hating, hurting. We drink deeply from the one Spirit, trusting the Spirit of God to heal and transform all parts, all members.

This chapter ends with Paul saying,

²⁷ Now you all are the body of Christ, and portions of members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed these in the church... apostles... prophets... teachers,...gifts of healings.....administrations.... ²⁹ Are all apostles? Prophets? Teachers? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healings? ³¹ But be zealous for the greater gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.

And in chapter 13 he shows the more excellent way, talking about the greater gifts, naming love as the greatest. Love. Resurrection love. Merciful love. Gracious love. That is our purpose.

In this, the year of the Lord's favor, in this Sabbath season, may we live fully into our oneness—one Christ, one Spirit, one God, one Love, one Life—into our oneness with every part, every member so that the one body of Christ reveals what God is doing in this world!

January 24, 2016

The story of Dirk Willems has captured the *imagination* of many people in the Anabaptist tradition. This image, based on Jan Luyken's etching of the 16th-century Dutch believer (published in a collection of Anabaptist martyr stories) has become a source of inspiration for Anabaptists. It depicts the moment when Dirk, who had escaped from prison where he was being held because of his faith, turns to pull his pursuer out of icy water, after the latter has fallen through the ice. As the account goes on, Dirk is re-arrested and then executed.

I have to use my *imagination* when I think about someone walking on ice. I have never seen a lake covered by ice. However, that lake was real – as real as the loving Spirit of God working on the lives of Dirk Willems and his pursuer.

Today, when we celebrate **World Fellowship Sunday**, my *imagination* is challenged again. What if the world were full of people like Dirk Willems? What if we saw Jesus in the face of our enemies? How could we be a global church whose spiritual cornerstone is mutual love among Christians, even to the point of giving up one's own life? How could we experience that love in our families, work places and neighbourhoods? It is that way of living that allows us to understand the other in a deep way, by listening and speaking to the other in love.

Let's ask God for his presence to help us to live according to that *imagination* in each relationship around us.

In peace,



César Garcia, MWC General Secretary