

FROM THE MANY, ONE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When handbell practice began Wednesday a week ago, Karla was very excited. “Look!” she said, “everybody’s here!” Everybody means eleven ringers around the tables and our director out front. Sometimes we practice with two or three ringers missing. It’s doable, but it’s a challenge. If the gaps are in the treble clef, it’s hard to hear the melody. If the gaps are in the bass clef, we miss the sustaining beat and harmony. Occasionally, Karla will fill in for an absent ringer, but that’s a bittersweet solution. It helps to have more ringers, but it’s hard to stay on tempo and play the music correctly when the head of the choir is not standing in front of us giving us directions.

I play the A, Ab/G#, and G bells. Occasionally, I have to reach over and grab Mary’s Gb bell and ring one note before quickly switching back to G. Now, if Karla asked me to play a solo one Sunday morning for the offertory, just using my three regular bells (remember, this is just for illustration purposes! It’s not actually going to happen!), I could probably do it. However, depending on the song, you might never hear the melody, or you would hear only bits and pieces of the melody. Also, there might be several intervals of silence because I would have no notes to play. But, add in my other ten fellow ringers, put Karla in front of us, and we can make some music. You get the picture. To paraphrase the apostle Paul, “For the handbell choir is one and has many members, and all the members of the handbell choir, though many, are one choir.”

Paul’s striking image of the human body to illustrate God’s gifts to the church is the mirror image, the other side of the coin from last week’s epistle lesson. From the one God come many gifts. Many gifts make up the one body. There’s a nice symmetry intended for the Christian community of faith, just as there is in the human body. However, Paul’s use of the human body to illustrate the importance of cooperation is not original to him. Listen to this fable from Aesop, called “The Belly and the Members.”

“One fine day it occurred to the Members of the Body that they were doing all the work and the Belly was having all the food. So, they held a meeting and, after a long discussion, decided to strike work until the Belly consented to take its proper share of the work. So, for a day or two the Hands refused to take the food, the Mouth refused to receive it, and the Teeth had no work to do. But after a day or two, the Members began to find that they themselves were not in a very active condition. The Hands could hardly move, and the Mouth was all parched and dry, while the Legs were unable to support the rest. So, thus, they found that even the Belly in its dull, quiet way was doing necessary work for the Body, and that all must work together or the Body will go to pieces.”

The image of the body with its different members was commonly used in Greek and Roman philosophy. Typically, whoever was in charge (the king or the emperor) was seen as the head. The different parts of the body represented the hierarchy of the particular

society. That's where we get the idea of the "body politic." However, there is a very big difference between the "body politic" in Greek and Roman philosophy and the "body of Christ" in the New Testament. The "body politic" was both descriptive and prescriptive for society. The power hierarchy was decided and enforced and supported by the image of the body, with the sovereign at the top and everyone else knowing his or her place. Some members of the body were seen as more important than others, and that's the way the sovereign and the power players wanted it to be.

Paul, on the other hand, uses the very same imagery of the body to illustrate exactly the opposite idea. He says it in different ways:

- To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (v. 8)
- For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (v. 13)
- If the foot/ear would say, "Because I am not a hand/eye," that would not make it any less a part of the body. (vv. 15, 16)
- As it is, there are many members, yet one body. (v. 20)
- The eye/head cannot say to the hand/feet, "I have no need of you." (v. 21)

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:27-28) Likewise, in his letter to the Ephesians, he writes, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." (Ephesians 4:4-6) And then there is the reference to the one body and its parts in Ephesians 4, "But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love." (Ephesians 4:15-16)

You know what was on the Continental Congress's agenda for Thursday, July 4, 1776. The members unanimously approved the Declaration of Independence. There was at least one other agenda item that day. The following motion was approved: "Resolved, That Dr. Franklin, Mr. J. Adams and Mr. Jefferson, be a committee, to bring in a device for a seal for the United States of America." Those three distinguished, brilliant men worked for six weeks, with the help of an artist named Pierre Eugène Du Simitière, to design a seal for the new nation. On August 20, 1776, the committee submitted a written description of the proposed seal to the full Congress. However, their recommendation was not acted on and was officially ordered to "lie on the table." Two more committees worked on designs before the Congress approved a final Great Seal.

Although their original design was not accepted, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson's suggested motto – "E pluribus, unum" – was included in the final design. Originally, those three founding fathers suggested the phrase – "E pluribus, unum . . . From the many, one" – to underscore the importance and necessity of establishing a unified federal government out of the thirteen original colonies/states. They even pointed out the symbolism of the thirteen letters of the Latin phrase representing the original thirteen states.

That motto – “From the many, one” – has also come to mean for most of us something like “one nation made up of many different kinds of people.” Here’s an excerpt from an essay written by Brenna Cegelka, a junior at Vanderbilt University, about the meaning and importance of that phrase for our nation and our common life. As you listen, notice how it can be applied to what the apostle Paul writes about unity and diversity in the body of Christ – “many members, one body.”

“It reveals that inherent in America’s very foundation is the ideal that diversity – of opinion and of people – is our greatest strength. It is our most unifying characteristic. The one thing almost all Americans have in common is that none of us are from here. That rich diversity leads to a deeper, more profound appreciation for the very principles upon which this country was founded: free speech, religious liberty, and equality. Too often, people will confuse unity with uniformity. That is a superficial and simpleminded interpretation of unity. Homogeneity is not the same as unity. While similar people may work together toward a common goal, research has shown time and again that diverse people working together yields even better results. It’s true in athletics. It’s true in business. And it’s true in the military. It seems that diversity and unity are two sides of the same coin. Unity is not the absence of diversity, but the celebration of it.”¹

Of course, that’s exactly what the apostle Paul told the Corinthian Christians 2,000 years ago: “If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body.” (1 Corinthians 12:17-20)

In his comments on the unity of Christ’s body, Brian Peterson writes, “the diversity within the church community is not something to be tolerated, or regretted, or manipulated for one own’s advantage, but something to be received as the gift that it is. Paul’s argument implies that not only diversity, but unity in that diversity, is a reality without which the church cannot live.”²

One simple but effective way to understand the apostle Paul’s writings is to think of him saying, “This is who you are in Christ. Now live that way!” About the gift of unity in Christ, Paul writes, “[Christ] has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.” (Ephesians 2:15 -16)

That’s **who we are** as the body of Christ. We have been given the gift of unity through Christ’s death which reconciled us to God. So, then, **how are we supposed to live?** “Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4:1-3) In other words, “As it is, there are many members, yet one body. . . . If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” (1 Corinthians 12:20, 26)

The gift of unity in Christ brings with it many different gifts to be used for the common good. Neither the singular gift of unity nor the variety of gifts in our church is meant to be hoarded or used just for our own enjoyment and benefit. We are blessed

beyond measure in our congregation and, as a friend in town always says, “We’re blessed to be a blessing.” What exactly do you think that would be like, as the body of Christ?

Maybe this writing from Saint Teresa of Ávila can help us think about what it means to be the body of Christ in Wallace and beyond. She was a Spanish nun in the 16th century and is remembered for writing spiritual classics and reforming the Carmelite order of nuns to emphasize austerity and contemplation. Here’s how Teresa described the responsibility and gifts that come with our being the body of Christ:

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

Let us pray: Living God, we thank and praise you for our membership in the body of Christ. Remind us that we are all members of the one body. As the body of Christ, may we bear witness, with our words and through our actions, to your love and grace in Jesus Christ our Lord, who alone is head of the body, his Church. Amen.

NOTES

¹Brennan Cegelka, “E Pluribus Unum. Out of Many, One,” at www.vanderbilt.edu.

²Brian Peterson, “Commentary on 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a,” January 24, 2016 at www.workingpreacher.org.