

Pastor's Message – 1/23/22  
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Some of you who are participating in this worship service may not even be aware, but here in Wisconsin, there are a lot of fans who are watching the Green Bay Packers in their hunt for an appearance in the Super Bowl. There are lots of articles, lots of prognosticators, looking ahead at this weekend's matchups.

Some of those predictions hinge on the health of the players. At the time of this writing, several key players for the San Francisco 49s are not 100% and may not even play. One reason to predict a Packers' victory, the commentators say, is that several of the Packers' key players, on the other hand, are returning to the field after recovering from injuries. Teams at full health, with more of their players healthy, have a better chance for victory. Conversely, not being at full strength does not bode well for a team's chances. Paul could have been thinking of that in writing the portion of his 1<sup>st</sup> Letter to the Corinthians we heard today – if he followed professional football. Maybe he would have been talking about the health of a team – a body, so to speak.

Have you ever wondered about the importance of toes? Aaron Rogers' toe has been in the news for a while. So, what's the big deal about a pinkie toe, or any one toe. After all, they're just little stubs of bone and flesh. They're a pain to have around when they make contact with a chair while the rest of the body is trying to make its way to the refrigerator in the dark. What good are toes anyway?

I read a story about how, one day, a man was removing a large limb from a big old elm tree with his chain saw. The limb unexpectedly gave way and landed on him, crushing his left foot. That foot was never the same again. After several surgeries it was decided that the toes on that foot would have to be amputated. Today that man has difficulty maintaining his balance and walks with a limp because those toes are missing. His ankles, knees and hips are constantly sore because of the extra pressure placed on them. His whole body sorely misses those toes.

Of course, those toes couldn't live once they'd been separated from the rest of his body. Without their connection to the flow of blood, the nervous system, the bones and the tendons, they simply could not survive. They were literally cut off from what the rest of the body had to give. They couldn't live on their own. The same is true in the church. When one member is missing, the rest of the body feels it.

It is true, one doesn't need the church to believe in God. I've heard it said, "I don't need church. I believe in God, and sometimes I see evidence of him in a beautiful lake in the wilderness when I'm fishing. The light reflects off the water in the early morning and I'm convinced there must be a God. And that's all that counts." But what a selfish religion that is. No commitment to the Body of Christ. Doing nothing for the kingdom of God. Living for himself and occasionally for his family. No Christ, no grace, no forgiveness, no responsibility to brothers or sisters in the faith. Just Jesus and me ... when I'm out fishing.

When a member is cut off or cuts itself off from the rest of the body, it cannot survive much less thrive.

Let's look at a different way. With the football playoffs in full swing, perhaps a different version of today's passage will take on new meaning.

For the team is one and has many players, and all the players of the team, though many, are one team. Indeed, the team does not consist of one player, but of many. If the defensive end would say, "Because I am not the quarterback, I do not belong to the team," that would not make him any less a part of the team. And if the right tackle would say, "Because I am not a wide receiver, I do not belong to the team," that would not make him any less a part of the team. If the whole team were tackles, where would the running backs be? If the whole team were running backs, where would the kickers be? And if the whole team were kickers, where would the cornerbacks be? But as it is, the coach has arranged the players of the team, each one of them, as he chose. If all were quarterbacks, where would the team be? As it is, there are many players, yet one team. The quarterback cannot say to the tackle, "I don't need you." Nor can the defensive ends say to the running backs, "We don't need you." The team that wins is the team for which Paul writes, "If one player suffers, the team suffers together with him; if one player is honored, the team rejoices with him."

It is obvious that we are all different -- each part of our body has a different part to play. One of the most important needs we face is to find out what part of the Christian body we are. We will most likely need help. That help can come from our fellow members who are also part of the body, but most importantly it comes from our divine General Manager who has designed us for our part. Each part helps the church to die or just to survive or best, to thrive.

Each person can do something; each person has gifts to help the church be what God has built it to be. It is the job of every believer to figure out what that purpose might be; to wonder how your gifts can help that purpose. Dream. Imagine. Be creative. Open yourself to things you haven't thought of before. Wonder just what it might be that hasn't been thought of yet, imagine how your uniqueness and your personal gifts can grow your church.

Who has the "gift" of giving rides, holding crying babies, handing out programs, mowing the lawn, building worship services, working at the A/V table, or folding bulletins? These things all need to happen, and they are all places where you can and should be *servicing*. Serving in the church and living out of your giftedness — we all should do both. It's good to help vacuum the floors, bring canned goods or non-perishables, this month it's pasta, next month it's soup, for the Food Pantry. Some may have the gift to decorate the sanctuary or create an environment to capture the message of the Scripture we pray over during our Sunday worship. Using our gifts in creative ways to serve God and service others is what being God's church is about.

Consider a hypothetical situation. Suppose you had a friend who was unfamiliar with the church. The person had never attended a worship service or sat in on a Sunday school class. He or she had never participated in any of the other activities that happen

in churches. In effect, Christianity was a complete mystery to him/her. And so, more out of curiosity than anything else, the person asks you, "What exactly is the church?"

How would you respond? What would be your definition of church? I'm guessing that a lot of us might begin by explaining that the church is where those who hold a common conviction about Jesus Christ as their risen Savior come together. Typically, that happens in a sanctuary on Sunday morning, but it's by no means limited to a churchy-looking building with stained glass. Jesus said it could occur wherever two or more are gathered in his name (Matthew 18:20). Consequently, the church is not so much a particular place as it is a particular people who share the same faith, follow the same Lord, and profess the same beliefs.

That would be a short and sweet definition for the church. But of course, like most short, sweet definitions, it doesn't really tell the whole story. Christians share some beliefs, to be sure. However, we are a long way from embracing every belief.

Since being appointed to the Waupun United Methodist Church, I have marveled at the twenty-two churches in Waupun alone. In the United States, for example, there are over nine hundred Protestant denominations. There are Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopalians. There are Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Congregationalists. There are Seventh-day Adventists and Assembly of God churches, Moravians, and Quakers. And that's only for starters. It seems as if new denominations spring up, even as the old ones split up. Thus, the question is no longer: "Are you a Baptist?" but "What kind of Baptist?"

When Jesus took a loaf of bread and announced, "This is my body broken for you" (1 Corinthians 11:24), it's difficult to imagine that, even in his most cynical of moments, he would have ever envisioned the church we have today. But part of the reason for this diversity is that we all tend to have our different opinions. One group reads the Bible more literally than another. Some ordain women as clergy, and some don't. The emphasis over here might be on personal salvation, while over there it's on social justice. Let's face it: it's not our beliefs that keep the church together. Most of the time just the opposite is true. Our beliefs are what tear us apart.

So, getting back to this imaginary friend who is inquiring about the church, what should we tell him/her? After all, if it's not our convictions that unite us as Christians, what is it? Some have suggested that it's our common work. In other words, despite our varied understandings of scripture and theology, every denomination still engages in some sort of mission. As a matter of fact, there are even occasions when we seem able to set our differences aside in order to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, care for the sick, and lift up the downtrodden and oppressed.

Perhaps then, it's not so much our shared beliefs that make us the "one holy, catholic church" -- as the Apostles' Creed puts it -- but our shared commitment to doing the work of Jesus Christ. The only difficulty I have with this definition is that, rather than saying too little, it almost says too much. Whether we like to admit it or not, the church has never had a monopoly on kindness, charity, and good will toward others. There are a lot of organizations which feed the hungry and shelter the homeless.

They may not be doing it in the name of Jesus Christ (as we are), but they're doing it all the same. That may be the key.

God's people do it in praise and worship of the God who loves us and gifts us. And there are an incredible number of ways in which members of the church can and do the work of the church. God's people are people who —

- bake pies for their elderly neighbors
- teach an adult Bible class
- volunteer at the hospital
- keep financial records
- mop the floors
- lead worship
- mow the church lawn
- write children's books
- distribute Christmas baskets
- organize a blood drive or ring bells for the Salvation Army
- play an instrument, or sing in the choir
- tutor disadvantaged kids
- give free piano lessons
- visit shut-ins.

And the list can go on and on depending on the varied and infinite gifts in any church. The question to raise, of course, is why we do what we do.

The questions then, to raise when we consider the health of the church and how your gifts help or hinder the health, are questions such as:

- What is the design of the church intended to achieve? What is the particular purpose of this church considering the gifts that God has given?
- Have we considered how this design should affect how we do ministry locally?
- What is our particular church designed to do well?
- If the design is excellent, but the church is not growing, is the execution of the design flawed? And if so, how?

You have to both consider how the church is built and then what is the result of that structure. You have to consider if that design will stand the test of time. And if not, how to change it. Consider how God has gifted you and for what reason God has put you in this particular time and place. What are your particular gifts? That is something we'll consider next week as we read more of Paul's Letter to the Corinthians. In the meantime, here's your homework, figure out what your role in the church body is; you aren't all toes or ears or tongues or quarterbacks or linebackers or wide receivers, but you each are important and with you and your gifts, the church will grow and flourish. Figure out what you can do, then do it, and lead your Church to the Super Bowl of the God's Kingdom.