

Date: September 17, 2006

SUNDAY: Ordinary 24

SERMON: From the Many, One

Text(s): 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

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Last week, I said that for the next three weeks, we'd be shaping our worship and preaching around what it means to be the church. We're focusing particularly on St. Paul's image of the church as the "body of Christ," which he elaborates on in chapters 12-13 of his first letter to the Corinthians. We're doing this to get all of us thinking together on a theme that occupied our Church Council and the members of all our elected committees at our retreat yesterday in what we hope will be the beginning of some creative strategic thinking and planning and dreaming. I believe I mentioned last week that the exercise we would be doing at the retreat would be engaging, stimulating, provocative, and fun.

Well, it was all of those things. If we're going to unpack Paul's analogy of the church and the body of Christ, then it's immediately obvious that a body is not simply an object but an actual person. When St. Francis of Assisi affectionately referred to his own body as "Brother Ass," he was acknowledging that he and his body were inseparable. We are all, for better or worse, embodied selves. It's the only sort of self that we know or can know. So in our exercise yesterday, the challenge was for us to describe what sort of person our congregation would be if we imagined ourselves as a single, embodied self. As Mary explained it to the group yesterday, normally when we try to do strategic planning, we tend to follow a model that is well-known—we look at strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and we use charts and statistics and trends. By trying to imagine our congregation as an actual person with all the things that make up a real person—age, gender, personality traits, musical preferences, temperament, how the person spends money and what they eat for breakfast—we're actually using a story-telling approach to

strategic planning. We're making a composite portrait of ourselves, and as we discovered yesterday, it was a real exercise in self-awareness. Would we see ourselves as a teen-aged boy named Eddie, as relatively new congregation did, or as an elderly woman named Grace about to die, as an older declining church in the city did? Just what would we look like if we were to really to imagine First Parish Church as one individual?

The real point was to try to understand who we are as accurately as possible, rather than who we used to be or who we want to be, because if we don't know who we are, we really can't know who or what we want to become as a congregation. We need as much self-awareness and self-knowledge as possible so that we can envision our mission and act together as Christ's body in the most focused and effective way possible.

I'm not going to go into great detail about our results this morning, because there's still a lot of finishing touches to be put on our canvas. But I can tell you that our "person," that is our collective self, that the 70 or so people who were at the retreat yesterday described, is someone between the ages of 55-60, whom we named Chris. We chose that name since we were a bit ambivalent about the question of the gender of our congregational self, so we decided that Chris was a name that could fit either gender. Here are just a few of the characteristics of our corporate self that we identified. Chris is well-educated, thoughtful, and energetic in volunteering and pursuing a variety of interests, and maintains a high profile in the community. Chris belongs to the sandwich generation in that there is an elderly parent or two as well as children and grandchildren who claim some of Chris's attention and energy, though neither may live close by. Chris values tradition and history and lives in a beautiful, very old house that eats up a large amount of money. Chris loves music and prefers it to be more of the classical variety than other musical styles. Outsiders sometimes consider Chris to be stuffy, though Chris thinks that he/she is very approachable and welcoming.

That's all I'll say about "Chris" today; there are many more traits and characteristics that we put on the canvas yesterday, some of them representing admirable strengths, and some of them representing real challenges. When the Council and our committees have had time to do more fleshing out of the portrait and have begun to see how this collective self might help us move forward in mission, we'll hear more from them. But imagining ourselves collectively as a single individual does tend to crystallize and bring into sharper focus what can sometimes be an abstract concept— we together as a congregation as "the body of Christ."

In the first part of 1 Corinthians chapter 12, which we looked at last week, Paul made the point that the life of the body is the Spirit, and the Spirit animates the body through all its parts by giving gifts to each part to be used for the common good. From the one Spirit, come many gifts, all of which contribute to the good of the whole. From the One, many.

In the second part of this chapter, he reinforces that point, but by turning the equation around. Instead of concentrating on the Giver of the gifts, he concentrates on the goal and result of the gifts— the wholeness and maturity of the body. The many gifts, the diverse ministries, the varied services that the individual members of the church perform all have as their end the building up of the whole body into a complete and healthy representation of Christ. (Someone suggested yesterday that the name "Chris" for our collective person is made up of the first five letters of the word Christ.) Individually, we are to be together in such a way that collectively, we look like Christ. Or as one of Paul's disciples writes in the epistle to the Ephesians: "*until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.*" From the many, one.

Paul himself says, "*For just as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of*

the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit . . . Now you are the body of Christ, and individually, members of it."

Paul's over-riding concern and the reason he wrote this letter in the first place was that the congregation at Corinth had somehow lost sight of the fundamental truth that a divided church cannot represent the one person, Jesus Christ. Christ is not divided, he says; therefore the church must not be divided either.

In Paul's day, there were a variety of reasons that the Corinthian Christians were dividing into factions. Last week, we saw one of them— the spiritual elitism of some of the members who thought their particular spiritual gifts made them superior to others. He's still dealing with that in today's lesson as well when he talks about each part of the body being indispensable because the body is not whole, the person is not whole, the church as the visible manifestation of the risen body of Christ is not whole unless it has all its parts, from the humblest to the most spectacular.

But in that opening sentence of today's lesson he mentions two other reasons that have been the cause of division and lack of wholeness: the distinction between Jews and Gentiles and the distinction between slaves and free people. From the evidence available to us, we know that those two issues were perhaps the two primary issues that the earliest Christian communities had to deal with. When earliest Jewish followers of Jesus found that pagan Gentiles were responding to their proclamation that God had raised Jesus from the dead, it sparked a crisis. The old sharply drawn distinctions between Jews and Gentiles reared their ugly heads. Pride in their respective ethnic identity and religious traditions often prevented them from being able to accept one another as equally God's beloved and chosen people. There's hardly a writing in our New Testament

which does not have the relationship between Jews and Gentiles within the church somewhere in the forefront or the background of the author's concerns. How could these historic distinctions be blended together into one new body, one new collective self?

The same was true of social and economic distinctions. Slavery was a well-established institution in the Hellenistic-Roman world, and was very different from the slavery that we're more familiar with in our own history. Slaves in the Roman empire had well-established legal rights and slave-owners had well-established legal responsibilities toward those they owned, including limits on how long a person could be a slave and provisions for gaining their freedom. Yet a great social gulf existed between slaves and free people, as we might expect. There is no exact parallel in our society, but perhaps we can get a sense of the flavor of that divide if we think about the attitudes and social distinctions between a wealthy socialite who lives in a townhouse on the Upper East Side in New York city and the illegal Mexican immigrant she employs as her housemaid. Now imagine the two of them sitting in the same pew in church on Sunday morning, or even more to the point, imagine the Mexican housemaid being elected to the Church Council while her employer is not. We can see the problem, can't we?

In our society today, different issues are the cause for dismembering the Body of Christ. Within most of the major Christian denominations and even within individual congregations, the issue of the place of homosexual persons within the church is a great cause for division and fragmentation. Just this past week, the bishops of seven Episcopal dioceses have failed to reach a compromise in the furor sparked by the consecration of Gene Robinson, a gay man, two years ago in New Hampshire. These seven dioceses want to break away from the American Episcopal Church and

its presiding bishop who supports the full inclusion of gay people within the church. Also just this week, a Presbyterian minister in Pittsburgh was brought up on charges by the denomination that she violated church law by performing a ceremony of blessing on the union of two women. At our own national synod of the United Church of Christ last year, the delegates voted to support the notion of "equality of marriage," meaning supporting the recognition of a union between same-sex couples as marriage. While the action of the national synod is not binding on individual churches because we are congregational in our polity, it has become a divisive issue nonetheless. Over 100 congregations have withdrawn from our denomination since that action, although a number of others have applied to join as a result. And next week at our Maine Conference, our delegates will be considering a resolution calling on all our UCC congregations in Maine to begin having prayerful and thoughtful conversations on the issue of the quality and equality of marriage. The question for us is, will we be able to have those conversations in such a way that we "*maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace*," as Paul says, even when we disagree with one another? In other words, will our collective self be bigger than our individual selves? Or to put it another way, in light of yesterday's retreat exercise, will "Chris" be able to deal creatively and responsibly and lovingly with this challenge so that we emerge from the conversations more united than before?

Now we should be clear in our minds what unity means. It does not mean uniformity of social and political opinion or doctrinal emphasis. It does not mean uniformity of liturgical practice. It does not mean uniformity of worship styles. It does not mean uniformity of church governance or organization. Nor does unity mean simple majority rule. It does not mean an end to our individuality.

Unity does mean accepting our common identity as members together of the one, universal

body of the Risen Christ. Unity does mean individually being committed to maintaining and strengthening the integrity of the whole body. Unity does mean being willing to put all of our individual gifts of the Spirit to work for the common good rather than insisting on getting our own way. Unity does mean that together, we accept our calling to be Christ's ambassadors, representing by our own life together, God's reconciliation of the world.

Our membership in the church is not simply the same as our membership in the Rotary Club or the Hospital Auxiliary or the league of New England Patriots fans. Our membership in the church is "by water and the Spirit." Our baptisms are the sign that we have been accepted as God's beloved children without any merit or preconditions on our part. Nothing that we bring to the table, whether of those accidental things that we were born with, nor those layers of identity or gifts which we have acquired, nor any of our achievements, great or small, have a thing to do with the unity or integrity of the body of Christ. We are members of the Body of Christ by God's grace, and by God's grace alone.

Therefore, and it's a huge therefore, we cannot distinguish ourselves from other members of Christ's body on the basis of what they bring to the table that represents their own accidents of birth or achievements or acquisitions. None of the manifold gifts the Spirit has given can be the basis for making value judgments on one another. As we will see more fully next week, there is only one ground for our unity with other members of Christ's body, and that is to love one another as we have been loved by God.

We can and will differ in our opinions, our political views, our economic philosophies, our educational backgrounds, our financial holdings, our sense of taste, our musical preferences, and on and on the list could go. But it is love and love alone that will prevent these differences from becoming the basis for making distinctions that divide us and dilute our energies

and our focus from our true calling and identity—to become a place where the risen life of Christ takes on flesh and blood in us, and where God's reconciliation of the world becomes visible and real. That, and nothing less, is our calling, and our glory.