

Text: *1Corinthians 12:12-13* For just as the body is one and has many; members, and all the members 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 Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Context and expansion of text: *1 Corinthians 12:1-27*. For an insightful view of this text I suggest Eugene Peterson's **The Message**.

We are the Hands of Jesus

A few years ago I was president of Calhoun county Habitat for Humanity. We were getting ready to do a build in Seadrift and I was explaining the process to the local Rotary Club. One questioner asked me what church I belonged to and I explained that I was an Episcopalian and that wherever four or more Episcopalians met, there was also a fifth. My questioner replied that he was a Southern Baptist and that wherever four or more Southern Baptists met they disagreed and split to form another church. In ancient Corinth Apostle Paul found a people who drank like Episcopalians and feuded like Southern Baptists. Disunity got so bad in Corinth that Paul took them gently to task and spent a great deal of effort discussing inclusiveness and unity in diversity, among other things. His concerns sound very contemporary.

Paul maintained that if the church was going to live, then slave and free – Jew and gentile, had to find a way, of not only recognizing their differences, but celebrating the importance of the differences. If inclusiveness was to be meaningful, then unity in diversity had to be achieved. Jews, gentiles, free and slave – all had to become a tossed salad, not a melting pot. One did not confuse the eye for the ear. Each had its role. Greek and Jew all maintained their identity, but all contributed toward the unity.

Paul went on to talk about meaningfulness by maintaining that “only as you accept your part of that body does your “part” mean anything.” That is a bit much for those of us raised on individualism. He is saying that I have meaning, only in so far as I accept the fact that I am part of all others. A new way of thinking is demanded. Jim Rigby, an Austin Presbyterian minister, puts our individualistic vs community (collective) dilemma in these words: “The Elephant of a modern mind simply cannot fit in the antiquated mousetraps of simplistic binary thinking.” The old black or white, light or dark, male or female, individual or collective, binary way of thinking is the antiquated mousetrap. Paul says “The old labels we once used to identify ourselves – labels like Jew or Greek, slave or free—are no longer useful. We need something larger, more comprehensive. (1 Corinthians 12:13)

Lettuce, bell pepper, tomato, radish, cucumber. All enjoy their separate identity. They do not lose identity simply because they are a salad. Knowing those ingredients as a salad is

more and distinct from knowing the individual ingredients. Their existence is writ large as they become salad. Now, there are limits to analogies and I think that we have exhausted that one! What must be said is that binary thinking is no longer useful. The something “larger, more comprehensive” is the complexity of the scientific method providing us with a base from which we can link our reality to others, to the cosmos and to our spiritual journey.

Now, with all of that said, where is Paul putting us with respect to action, to doing something Christ-like! Our actions as Christians should start with prayer. All too often, my personal Christian action ends there as well. With Paul in mind it occurred to me that a good prayer is reciting the Lord’s Prayer; a better prayer is silently thinking about the wonders of God’s creation. The best prayer is when our hands are serving our fellow sojourners.

As we serve others, we are also serving ourselves. Thoreau, while waiting for fish to bite on Walden’s Pond, observed that “All perception of truth is the detection of an analogy: we reason from our hands to our head.” Grace sets us free, but to what end? To act! As we do Christ –like work, our hands feed compassion and faith to our heads. The truth will out, but only if we are in motion.

A quick example: I have realized recently that I have been, with annoying regularity, committing blasphemy, defined as “an indignity offered to God.” In particular, after each mass violence event in our country I have prayed for the victims and for the larger community. But I have done nothing to reduce violence. My prayer, full of pious words, but devoid of action, was an indignity offered to God. I hope that I can move from blasphemy to faithful servant and actually do something about violence. Watch our hands: They need to show more motion than to simply be folded together.

Action, meaningfulness, unity in diversity. Paul’s call to us is even more urgent today than it was 2000 years ago. Remember Paul’s words: “You are Christ’s body – that’s who you are! You must never forget this.” Amen.