

“How Big is the Body of Christ”

This week, we will have the pleasure of witnessing one of those beautiful, unifying events that makes us wonder why the world cannot come together all the time – The Winter Olympics. The motto of the Olympics is “Together we can change the world.” The logo is the five interlocking rings, representing the five continents, joined together in a common goal of celebrating sportsmanship.

Although the Olympics actually began in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., the first modern games took place in Athens, Greece in 1896. Perhaps the greatest legacy of the Olympic Games is their unifying power. In these troubled and uncertain times, the Games are the only truly global event where the whole world comes together. It saddens me that the spirit that grows out of these healthy competitions and that celebrates hours and hours of hard work, discipline and achievement on the part of the individuals and the teams that participate cannot be maintained throughout the year.

I thought about the unifying acts of this great event as I wrote the sermon for this morning, knowing that we would be coming together as family at the Table of God as we conclude our worship. You see, Holy Communion is another time when we gather in unity, at least as Christians. We come together knowing that, while each of us brings different joys, suffering, celebrations, and hope, we come as a body of believers who have the common goal of building the kingdom of God on earth. This idea is illustrated beautifully by Paul in his words to the church at Corinth.

Of course, there was a reason that Paul needed to write these words to the church almost 2000 years ago. Because then, as now, we know that when people become Christians, they don't at that same moment necessarily become nice. Conversion to Christianity, or in many of our cases, being brought up in Christian surroundings, does not automatically furnish a person with all the traits of a being Christian. It is something that we grow into, that we strive for. This was apparent in the first churches that God established.

The people of Corinth were known to be a hard-drinking and sexually promiscuous bunch. In first Century Palestine, if you wanted to really insult someone, you simply referred to him or her as a "Corinthian". Still, when Paul arrived in Corinth with the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, many Corinthians believed and joined the church. Unfortunately, they brought their reputations and even their behaviors right into the church with them. And if the truth be told, the church today is no different. This is why it is so important for us to remind ourselves of God's vision for the church – a body of believers working together to spread the Gospel.

In helping God's children in Corinth and today overcome the challenges that we face in living and working in unity, Paul uses the metaphor of a human body. He makes the point that, even though we are different in our gifts, backgrounds, abilities and even doctrines, we can be faithful and unified witnesses because we are all empowered by the same Holy Spirit. He does this with his words: "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."

What this says to us today is that while Christians are represented by many nationalities and from every background and station imaginable, we are all unified by the same Spirit that came down at Pentecost after Jesus' Ascension. On that day, God gave many people from every

corner of the globe the ability to hear and then spread the good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection in their own tongue. So although the message they spoke was the same, the words sounded different. But it was through that gift that Christians indeed came to live all over the world.

An important implication of these particular words from Paul is to remember that the church as the body of Christ is not just a rhetorical device. It is not just a metaphor for the sake of an easy to understand illustration. It points to real participation IN CHRIST because today, we are empowered and enlivened by the same Holy Spirit that was given to the first disciples and the first churches.

Another important message that Paul bring to the Corinthians and us it the reminder that each of us is worthy because of the individual gifts that God has given us. God orders the body of Christ in such as way as to emphasize that the body functions best when we add our personal flair to its work.

No one member is more important that the other. The CEO and the custodian are both important to the success of any organization and the same is true in the church. Listen to the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases Paul's words in *The Message*.

“I want you to think about how all this makes you **more** significant, not less. A body isn't just a single part blown up into something huge. It's all the different-but-similar parts arranged and functioning together. If Foot said, "I'm not elegant like Hand, embellished with rings; I guess I don't belong to this body," would that make it so? If Ear said, "I'm not beautiful like Eye, limpid and expressive; I don't deserve a place on the head," would you want to remove it from the body? If the body was all eye, how could it hear? If all ear, how could it smell? As it is, we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it.”

Friends, no one brings LESS to the body of Christ, no matter our backgrounds, our age, our education, our experiences or our abilities. And when we work together as a well-oiled machine, we display the unity in diversity that God intended for His children. We have many gifts but one Spirit. Many songs but one voice. And our oneness is strengthened when we use our different gifts to bring about the unity in worship, mission, spiritual growth, play and nurture that takes place in the church.

My children knew when they were growing up that, once that got passed 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, if they needed help with their math homework they would just have to wait until Daddy came home. By the same token, even today, if one of them needs to write an important letter, apply for a position, answer narrative questions on an application or decide how to word the family Christmas card, Mom is the one to call!

Of course, the same is true in the church. If everyone was the best Sunday School teacher in the church, there would be no one there to learn. If everyone at Nazareth was passionate only about missions, there would be no one to make sure we are being good stewards of our financial resources. If all of us could sing as beautifully as our choir members, there would be no one in the pews to smile, tear up and say, "Amen!"

The other important message for us from Paul's words to the Corinthians is that when we function as a body, when one part suffers, the body suffers. Some may see this as a curse, but I believe it is a blessing. Because this is a reminder that, when one part is truly dependent on another, then we are never really alone. Your joys and sorrows are celebrated and suffered by ALL of us! I may have told you this story before, but it fits so well in this context that I will tell it again.

A mother sent her little girl on an errand in the neighborhood. The little girl was gone much longer than she should have been and the mother started to worry. When she finally got home, her mother scolded her and asked where she had been, so she explained. “Susie broke her doll and I stopped to help her.” Her mother asked, “You don’t know anything about fixing dolls, how could you possibly help her? And she replied, “I stopped to help her cry!”

God made us as one body so we could weep when one weeps and rejoice when one rejoices. And this applies to the body of Christ throughout the kingdom of God. We can pray for our brothers and sisters who live in parts of the world that are ravaged by war even if we have not met them. And we can strengthen each other when we pray for those who are too tired or too angry or too confused to pray their own prayers. Indeed the body of Christ is right here and everywhere, so that we can live and love and even hurt together. In this way, God is glorified in every place.

But I believe our greatest challenge in this metaphor is found in the last line of Scripture that we heard. “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” This challenge is two-fold. First, it calls us to be a welcoming, authentic community in this place where people are accepted for who they are and what they bring to the body of Christ today. It means that we are to seek balance from one another, even as we work side by side sharing our own gifts, so that everyone who enters our fellowship, even if it is only for today, can find their place.

But second, it calls us to remember that, once we have been fed as the body here, we are called to take our spiritual nourishment into the world. This morning, I truly believe that each individual here will be symbolically fed – whether it is by the prayers, the singing, the words of Scripture, the message or the hospitality that is shown.

We will be spiritually fed in another way as we partake in the bread and the cup. Because we know that these ordinary elements represent extraordinary signs of grace. And while we come to the Table of the Lord as Community and are called to go from the Table and enact what already is. We are called individually and collectively to be and share the gifts of salvation for the children of God.

At the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona, two women gave the world an undying symbol of unity, peace and hope. Elana Meyer was the first South African to win an individual medal in her nation's return to the Olympic family after being excluded since 1960 over its apartheid system. In the same race, Ethiopia's Derartu Tulu won *her* country its first gold medal ever.

Afterwards, Meyer ran up to Tulu and planted a kiss on each of her cheeks. The two women took a victory lap hand in hand. It was a sight almost impossible to imagine at the time. Indeed, by the unity that is found in the spirit of the Olympic Games, South Africa was welcomed back into the Olympic family and the athletes provided a symbol of unity for the whole of Africa in a moment that will live on forever. The slogan, "Together we can change the world" was evident for everyone to see.

Friends, we have the same opportunity to spread the spirit of unity as we go from the table. We come as a community, nourished by the one body and saved by the blood of Christ, shed on the cross for us all. Let us take this blessing from our table and plant a kiss on someone who needs to be welcomed into the community of Christ with whatever gift they bring to the kingdom, knowing that the Cross and the Table truly make us one. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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