

“One Body” – Stephanie Wing, 1.24.10

I think this is one of the funniest passages in the Bible. I can't read it without having images of disembodied eyes, ears, and noses flying through space, each maintaining their independence from the others. The absurdity of such mental images points to the simplicity of Paul's message in this chapter – each of us is different and uniquely gifted, but all of us belong to the same body. Trying to separate ourselves from each other based on gift or function is as absurd as talking eyes and feet, and disembodied noses and ears. Paul uses a simple and well-known metaphor to describe the church as the body of Christ.

Greek philosophers used this image as an analogy for military groups or the citizens of a city. While it pointed to the interconnectedness of all members, they also used this image to show that each person had his or her purpose and function, and to argue that there was a defined, natural hierarchy according to function. The head, as the seat of wisdom, was the most important body part. Certain parts of the body were stronger, and more dominant. The best that each person could do was to know what his or her place was in society and to stick to it, to fulfill the duty and particular function as faithfully as possible and to accept the hierarchy of power and importance.

No so, says Paul! The “weaker” members of the body are the ones that require greater care. The less respectable members are the ones that are clothed

with greater honor, set apart and treated with even more respect. The church in Corinth was experiencing many divisions and disagreements, and those divisions were threatening to tear apart the church. Some people were boasting about their own gifts and importance, and many others were being neglected. Paul urges the Corinthian church towards unity, away from dissension, and to show care for each other that regards each part equally as a valued member of the body of Christ.

It amazes me to think about how God calls us into community together. It is like a giant puzzle with many pieces, and only God knows how it all fits together. Are we using all of our pieces? In churches we often tend to rely on the same small group of people to do most of the work. They are the ones who seem to have the gifts, or the resources needed for the task. But if we continue to rely on the same group of people, how will the body be balanced? And where will there be room for others to discover and use their gifts?

A couple of months ago we looked at what the Book of Order has to say about our purpose as a church. Last week in the Session retreat we looked at that again, as well as at the list of responsibilities of Elders in the church. Both are very long and diverse lists! I counted at least 37 different responsibilities in that list, and that number could be even higher when you really start to break down each of the responsibilities. Between that list and the church's calling, I can easily come up with at least 50 different tasks of ministry to which each individual

congregation is called. Can you imagine if any one person were expected to fulfill all 50 tasks? It would be impossible! And that is precisely the point – ministry has to be a collective effort engaging the whole body of Christ. Each member is gifted for particular services and activities, and each member is just as important for the functioning of the body as the next.

No single person could possibly fulfill all of these tasks, nor should any single person try to fulfill all of the tasks. That is not God's intention at all. God did not create any of us to be self-sufficient in ministry, but instead gifted each of us differently to drive home the point that we need each other. We need the entire body of Christ in order to fulfill our call as Christians to ministry in the world.

Often we tend to value independence and self-sufficiency. Sometimes personal success is our greatest enemy, because it fuels the notion that we can do it on our own, that we can accomplish anything by our own strength and merit. Too quickly we forget our dependence on God. We forget that the skills and gifts and talents that we have come only from God. When we receive praise or affirmation for our gifts, do we pat ourselves on the back, or do we thank God as the giver of the gifts, as the one who activates them in us?

Not only do we forget our dependence on God, we forget our dependence on each other. What happens when we try to do everything ourselves? We get burned out and resentful if others don't offer to help or aren't appreciative enough

of the effort we have made. When we work with others, we have the advantage of multiple gifts, many more resources, and different viewpoints and insights that improve the work overall. When the work of the church is done by a small group of the same people, it can keep others from discovering or using their gifts. It might mean that those who are already very active in service continue to fulfill the same functions, even if their gifts and passion could be better used in other ways.

No one is capable of doing every aspect of ministry. To expect the ordained leaders in the church to do all of the work of ministry is not only unrealistic, it is also not Biblical! We may have preconceived notions of what Ministers or Elders should do or should be like, but we need to remember that God calls a variety of individuals into ordained ministry, and not a single one whom God calls can do it all! We need to trust that God has gathered us together as a body, and equipped us for the ministry to which we have been called not because of any individual, but because of the gifts that each of us has. The work of ministry can't be done by a few, and there are no expendable members. But how do we discover our gifts? And how do we use them all in the church?

Think of the things you have done – in the church, at work, at school, or in any situation – where you feel like you have done a good job. What types of things have you enjoyed doing? What have others affirmed or recognized in what you have done? Sometimes we can discover our gifts by observing what we

already do well, what we most enjoy doing, or what others seem to look to us to do. When you think about things you enjoy or are good at, look for specific patterns. If you are the person that organizes family gatherings, gets friends together for dinner, and plans other social events, maybe you have a gift for outreach, or event-planning, or for making many people feel comfortable together, or for group-building. Maybe it is all of the above.

Sometimes we can identify our gifts by paying attention to the places where we tend to notice deficiencies, or where we have specific ideas for improvement. If you are constantly aware when things are late getting started, or if you get frustrated when things get off track, perhaps you have a gift for organization. We might not even recognize our gifts as gifts. What comes most naturally to us sometimes will be so natural that we wouldn't even think of it as a gift. We need to appreciate and recognize the gifts that we have to share with others.

It is tempting to conflate "gifts" with "skills." Sometimes we have certain skills that can always be used, but they aren't necessarily the gifts that God is calling us to use. Just because you are able to do something well doesn't mean that is what God is calling you to do in a particular situation. If we stick to what we can do well, we tend to get comfortable and rely on our own strengths. Oftentimes God will call us out of our comfort zone to use gifts that we never knew we had, even if it seems to us like we aren't particularly good at those things.

Last week I mentioned Frederick Beuchner's definition of calling – where your greatest joy meets the world's greatest need. Part of discovering the gifts that God gives us involves looking at the needs of the world around us. Look at the places in our own church where there is work to be done. We have a number of committees of the Session that might use your gifts, like Christian Education, Hospitality, Mission, Outreach, and Worship, or others. Did you know that our church by-laws require committees to have a majority of members who are not actively serving as Elders? That requirement recognizes the need for all members to be involved in the work of the body. What are the needs in our church? In our community? In our world? Are there any particular needs that are particularly pressing on your heart? What gifts do you have to share?

Paul's letter to the Corinthians reminds us of what it means to be church. A church is much more than the building in which we meet on Sunday mornings. Church is much more than the hour or so that we spend together. Church is the group of people – the body of Christ – that God calls together for the purpose of ministry. We are the church. You are the church. Every member of this body is gifted and called to share gifts to be the church in the world. What we do here on Sunday mornings is part of being church in the world, but there is more to be done.

Each Sunday as the offering is collected we are reminded of our call to return a portion of what we have been given in gratitude to God, for service in the

church and world. That includes our treasure, but also our time and talents. Sometimes it is easier to write a check than it is to take a few hours out of our week to give more of ourselves. There is something that each of us can do, no matter what our abilities or resources.

Consider serving on a committee and getting more involved in the work of this church. We particularly need more members on two of our new committees, Mission and Outreach, and on our Christian Education Committee. Maybe you aren't ready to start a new Bible Study, but perhaps you can help organize the resources that we have on the third floor. Maybe you aren't ready to go on a Mission trip this summer, but maybe you can help to identify areas of need. Maybe you aren't ready to go visit with prospective church members, but perhaps you can make phone calls or send cards to some of our members who can't worship with us on Sundays –homebound members, college students, or others. The point is, each of us has something to give, and in order to be a complete body of Christ, all of us need to use our gifts together for the common good.

I want to close by encouraging all of us to continue to be in prayer for the call and mission of this church. Pray as we discern together how God is calling us to be church here, in Harrodsburg, in 2010 and beyond. And pray for discernment for all of us, as we discover the gifts that God has given us to be used in this time and place. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.