

The Body of Christ

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

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.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then

deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts.

Here is my chance to preach on sports and athletics. In the coming few weeks, two important events are about to take place (three, if you care to count the Super Bowl): the opening of the Winter Olympics in Vancouver and the arrival of pitchers and catchers in spring training. The former occurs once every four years, and the latter occurs annually, as regular as the coming of spring itself and the arrival of the swallows at San Juan Capistrano. I don't struggle much with faith, but the opening of spring training is also the one day of the year when I am convinced, beyond any shadow of any doubt, that there is a God. Who could possibly believe otherwise on the first day of spring training?

We admire athletes because we respect their discipline, hour upon hour, day after day, year after year of training in the quest for the perfect curveball, the flawless dive, or shaving a hundredth of a second off of their previous best time. We envy athletes their fluidity, the way they skim through the water or effortlessly carve the snow heading down the side of a mountain. Who could not admire the acrobatic artistry of Jose Reyes at shortstop or Dan Marino's quick release and tight spiral, launching the football sixty or seventy yards downfield?

We are not alone in our admiration. St. Paul clearly was interested in the workings of the human body, perhaps because he was physically afflicted by what he referred to as a thorn in his flesh. But he also very likely subscribed to the Greek ideal of physical prowess and perfection. It comes up again and again in his writings: running the race, finishing the course. It's not at all difficult for me to imagine Paul in a stadium watching athletes hurl the discus or settling in front of the television with a bowl of popcorn to watch the NFL conference finals.

So common are these athletic metaphors in the writings of the apostle that they have suffused Christian history. The monks regarded themselves as “spiritual athletes” of a sort, striving after holiness and moral perfection by means of discipline and self-denial. Historians refer to an entire movement in British and American life as “Muscular Christianity,” which encompasses such groups as the Young Men’s Christian Association, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and, most recently, Promise Keepers. The conceit behind each of these movements was that athleticism was an effective way to draw people, men especially, to the faith. An initiative called the Men and Religion Forward Movement in the 1910s sought to lure men into the churches by placing display ads in the sports sections of newspapers. The game of basketball was invented in 1891 by James Naismith, a student at the YMCA training school in Springfield, Massachusetts, as a way of keeping young men occupied and out of trouble in the wintertime, between the football and baseball seasons. Volleyball was invented four years later at the Mount Holyoke YMCA. Naismith went on to the University of Kansas in 1898, where he served – significantly – as both director of athletics and director of the chapel.

Athletics. The beauty and fluidity of bodily motion. And as Paul notes in today’s epistle, each part of the body plays a crucial role. To watch an athlete in action is to admire the remarkable skill and grace, all parts of the body in perfect rhythm – hands, legs, eyes – none seeking to outpace or disrupt the others. And the same principle applies to team sports. Every member of the team is crucial. As dazzling as Michael Jordan was in his prime, he still needed Scottie Pippin and a supporting cast.

As symbols go, the human body is a perfect metaphor for the body of Christ. Each of us has a role to play, the apostle says. Some are given the task of teaching or prophecy, others exercise leadership, and still others serve in other ways. Taken together, it’s an organic whole, each part of the body functioning in harmony with the rest of the body. There’s no provision

here for jealousy. “If the foot would say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body,” Paul writes. “And if the ear would say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?”

As any athlete knows, an injury or an impediment in one part of the body can disrupt the rhythm of the entire body. Think of a major-league pitcher. Any pitching coach will tell you that if a pitcher injures his ankle or strains a muscle in his thigh, it throws the motion of his entire body out of kilter. If he tries to continue pitching in such circumstances, he will be ineffective and very likely cause further injury.

So too in the church, the body of Christ. When one part of the body is injured or incapacitated, the entire body suffers and is thrown out of rhythm. When someone is ill or is alienated from the community of faith, the entire body functions at less than full capacity. When the people of Haiti suffer, we all share in their suffering. And properly so, for we are all one body, and an affliction visited on one member of the body affects the functioning of the entire body. “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it,” the apostle writes.

But Paul adds still another injunction to this familiar image, an injunction to pay special attention to those who others might regard as less important members of the body. The apostle says that “the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect.” Paul is referring here to the bench players and the utility infielders, those who typically don’t grab the headlines or figure into the highlight reels. We need specifically to honor, the apostle says, those Jesus described as “the least of these.”

Paul's words here deserve special attention: "But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another."

And here we encounter our challenge from today's epistle. For the body of Christ, as for an athlete, every part of the body is important, and the body cannot function properly if a part of the body is injured. But beyond that, Paul asks us to devote particular attention to those whose contributions to the body of Christ are less conspicuous.

So I invite you to consider the utility infielders in your life. The grocery-store clerk or the garage attendant. The janitor at work or the bank teller. And here at Christ Church, the local manifestation of the body of Christ, those who serve quietly and selflessly and without recognition, without complaint – members of the choir and the vestry, those who organize coffee hour or teach in Sunday school. Our life here would be diminished without their efforts. Just as an athlete cannot function if one of her limbs is injured, so too the body of Christ needs the contributions of all members of the body.

It doesn't take much, in my experience. A kind word or a smile. Some indication that the person across the counter is a person, not merely a functionary. Eye contact is a good place to start. A "hello, how are you today?" instead of merely barking your order to the waiter at the restaurant. And then listening carefully to the response. "Please." "Thank you." And, most important of all – and for some the most difficult of all, "I'm sorry."

I'm not very good at this, I confess. But I'm learning, especially from my wife, who seems to do it instinctively. I try to be especially attentive to those who seem awkward or uncomfortable, those, for example, who appear to struggle with their weight, women in particular. There are so many people in our lives who are invisible. And you'll be amazed at the conversations that ensue.

That's the payoff, I suppose, if one were needed. But Paul instructs us to do it, to acknowledge and honor "the least of these" in our midst: "those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor."

The utility infielders. The body of Christ.

Christ Church

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