

July 17, 2016
1 Corinthians 10:15-17, 31-33
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“One Body”

Good morning! I'd like to describe something for you this morning -- this could be a description which fits several things, but I'm thinking of one in particular. This isn't a riddle, but when you think you know what I'm talking about, raise your hand. I might call on you, so don't raise your hand unless you have a plausible answer.

Everyone has one of these. No one gets more than one. They can be very similar to one another, but no two are exactly alike. They are fearfully and wonderfully made, but they can be broken. Repairs can be really expensive. When you're young, you're probably most concerned with how it looks, as you get older you just hope it still works. I'm talking about our bodies -- not specifically *our* bodies, but human bodies in general. It isn't just humans that have bodies -- animals have them, too. Even non-living things come in packages which we call “bodies.” I got a card a couple years ago for a running buddy of mine. On the front is a picture of a guy in a plaid blazer, standing by an old Chevrolet on a used car lot. The front says, “The body is in pretty good shape, but there are some exhaust problems and gas issues.” The inside of the card reads, “Something about this card reminded me of you.” We laughed until we cried.

It's pretty safe to say that bodies are a universal part of the human experience. So it's no surprise that the apostle Paul turns to that image several times -- with different shades of meaning -- in the book of 1 Corinthians. Something important to remember about 1 Corinthians, which may not be immediately obvious when we consider only a few verses at a time, is that 1 Corinthians was written in the middle of a big church fight. The Corinthians were a boisterous bunch, multi-cultural and opinionated, and Paul had his hands full

trying to keep them together. The biblical book we know as 1 Corinthians was actually the second letter which Paul wrote to them -- we don't have the text of the first letter -- and we know that he wrote at least one more.

I don't know if it's comforting to you, but I find it perversely comforting to know that there have been church fights for almost as long as there has been a church. Somebody quipped at Annual Conference, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name . . . somebody's gonna do something stupid." The Corinthians were fighting about eating meat sacrificed to idols, community meals, and spiritual gifts -- not the hottest topics of the 21st century, perhaps, but I think we can still learn a lot from Paul's teaching and counsel.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are one in Christ. Not just in a theoretical, spiritual sort of way, but in an actual, embodied way. The ritual of the church in which this is most literally true is the ritual which our text describes today, the ritual in which you will be invited to participate little later. It is communion -- literally coming together -- around the body of Christ. For Brethren, the bread which we break has never been the literal transubstantiated body of Christ, but it's a powerful symbol of grain which is ground and loaves which are formed and bread which is baked into one loaf in order to feed God's people. In order to be shared, this loaf must be blessed, broken, and torn, just as Jesus' physical body was. The wine -- or in our case, grape juice--is also made from individual fruit which was gathered and crushed into one liquid. The way liquid is shared is that it is poured out; it has to leave its container. This is what we remember and celebrate as the blood of Christ.

Communion has lots of symbolic overtones, and believe me, the church has had disagreements about all of them, ever since Paul wrote to the Corinthians, but the literal, physical elements of this ritual are not that complicated. Bread and grape juice. You could find some version of both these things at a pre-school snack table or at a five-star restaurant. And pre-school snacks and fancy dinners serve a common purpose: they nourish our bodies. Remember, we each have one, and each one needs to be fed. We bring our own bodies to the communion table, and come together to receive the nourishment which we need from the body of Christ.

I have a rare opportunity this morning. Not only do I get to look out and see that many different bodies can wear the same kind of T-shirt, but the printing on the shirt is the message I want you to leave with today. How cool is that? There are some Sundays when this wouldn't work -- not every gospel message translates into T-shirts -- but it is a great day when folks can go forward for communion wearing the words, We are one body in Christ. Even if you don't have them on your chest, I trust that these are words which we can all take to heart.

The purpose of these shirts is to express solidarity with our sisters and brothers in Nigeria, particularly those in Ekklesiyar Yanuwa a Nigeria, the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria. That is another layer of meaning to the body of Christ, and one which the apostle Paul had already thought of in this letter to the Corinthians. Here's what he writes in Chapter 12, verses 12 and 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 one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, Americans or Nigerians [I added that phrase] -- we were all made to drink of one Spirit."

Part of the body of Christ in Northeastern Nigeria has been injured by religious extremists. People have been killed, school girls kidnapped, homes and churches destroyed. Many of those who were displaced are returning to their communities without the resources to rebuild what has been lost. Carol and Norm Waggy will be talking about this during our Table Talk following worship. But as important as it is to respond to the church in Nigeria with prayer and support, we need to be careful not to be drawn into pity or condescension, because the church in Nigeria is vital and growing. In the midst of persecution, God has added to their numbers, the church has been a witness to non-retaliation, and has provided care for those who have been traumatized, and those who seek reconciliation for themselves and with their neighbors. Some Christians and Muslims are cooperating to rebuild communities where they will live and work together. There is a good deal we can learn by walking along side other members of the body of Christ. I'm sure Norm and Carol will talk about this, too.

No church is ideal or idyllic -- not the Church of the Brethren, not EYN, certainly not those crazy Corinthians. But Paul provides a prescription of good spiritual health, and a check-up for judging our own actions. It's as relevant to the body of Christ in 2016 as it was in 54 AD, and even when we're not sure of what we're doing, this is a safe course. "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Be imitators of me [that is, Paul] as I am of Christ."

Do everything for the glory of God; be imitators of Christ -- that is the prescription for the body of Christ to be healthy and whole. As we come together at the table of the Lord, may we drink of one Spirit and proclaim that we are one body in Christ. Amen.