

“It Takes a Village” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry PC(USA) January 18, 2007

TEXT: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a 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. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to 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 were to 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.

IN 54 CE, THE CHURCH AT CORINTH, wasn’t very old. Its first members were Jews who had been expelled from Rome. Almost 20 years after Jesus left the church in human hands, these followers of Jesus found themselves in what was, well, the Las Vegas of its time. Set on an isthmus in Greece, this ancient port town had been destroyed in war a century or so earlier, and then rebuilt by the Romans. The architecture was new, the roads and docks were good, and it was full of people from all over the ancient world. These varied people brought their own religions, and Corinth had more than two dozen temples to various gods. Many of these gods were worshipped with slaughtered animals or temple prostitutes.

In the midst of this town, the new Christian congregation was struggling to find its identity, indeed to sustain its life. A few members were rich; most were poor. Some of them were having ecstatic experiences, what we would call “speaking in tongues”; others were not. Some were conservative about worship and want the old hymns exclusively; others were putting together a praise band and making up whole new songs to sing.

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter, First Corinthians, because the Christians in the city of Corinth were in trouble. That church of fairly recent converts was self-destructing over petty issues and differences—over who was doing their part and who was not. Feelings of superiority and feelings of resentment had come to matter more (to them) than building community and thriving, more to them than accomplishing the work of God’s kin-dom.

So Paul wrote, making the point, over and over, that each member has particular gifts, different gifts, valuable gifts, but not the same gifts. He reminds them, just like a human body, the beloved community needs all of the members, for all were one in the Spirit of Christ-- even the ones who are weird and different, even the ones who are grouchy and hard to get along with; even the ones you might label as the appendix, or the spleen, the unnecessary or outmoded organ whose only remaining function seems to be to flare up.

Paul especially spoke about the ones who labeled themselves the appendix, or the spleen, unwanted, overlooked, out of date, ineffectual, unable. Paul might well have been writing to the young Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, the lad who said to God. "I am too young, I am unable." Paul's words echoed voice of God who said to Jeremiah, "Do not be afraid I am with you. I have put my words in your mouth. I have given you special and unique gifts. Now go and use them. Uproot when necessary, but always in the effort to plant and build up. We are each to use our gifts in accordance with the grace that God has given us." (Jeremiah 1:5-10)

Every gift, every person, counts. This was demonstrated to one man when he stopped to admire a huge modern church in New York City. A little girl who was sitting on the steps looked up and asked him, "Do you like it?" Surprised, he answered, "yes, its really very beautiful and impressive. "I am glad you like it," the young girl replied, "because I helped build it." The man smiled and said, "You are awfully small to have worked on the construction of such a large building. Tell me, what did you do?" The little girl proudly announced, "My father is a mason. And everyday that he worked on this church, I brought him his lunch."

"There are many gifts, but one Spirit.... to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it."

The church in Corinth was one of the first Christian communities to fail. No they didn't run out of money. And they didn't run out of people in need whom they could serve, or those to whom they could proclaim Gods grace and love. It wasn't because of an earthquake, or fire or flood. But rather, they just stopped being the church; they stopped being a cooperating, caring Christian community, the body of Christ.

I don't think it was until I got to seminary that I really experienced true Christian community. And it wasn't so much from textbooks, or lectures or in a classroom, as it was out on a grassy field playing with a Frisbee; playing a game, new to me, called Ultimate Frisbee.

For the game, we divided into two teams of about ten players each, and the idea was to throw the Frisbee to another teammate, who then threw it on to another teammate, on down the field and past the goal line. We had to do this without dropping it, or allowing the other team to take it away. It required a huge amount of cooperation and teamwork to make a score. But playing that simple game of Ultimate Frisbee helped us to get acquainted and build new relationships.

The Church is really a lot like that. It's when we are active, serving usefully and working together that we become known and we get to know others, that we can connect and build friendships and trust, and that we truly become members of the body, the church family. And like the Church which Paul describes as the body of Christ, the Ultimate Frisbee field can be a very special place, where strangers became enthusiastic and valued teammates, and where we can actually be our true and imperfect human selves, living out our strengths and gifts, and even our weaknesses and failings.

In playing Ultimate Frisbee, it turns out that it's less about having lots of athletic ability and skill and more about being in the right place and willing to try. I still remember my own astonishment and thrill when I made my first catch or achieved a decent toss. Every single player on the team, even the slow or clumsy ones like me, were critically important. For a team to score, everyone had to be involved. The Church of Jesus Christ is like that too. Or at least supposed to be

It's not always easy or convenient or even fun to step up to participate and work and give of time and energy. But if you care about something, and if you realize others are depending on you, it becomes less of an option and more of a call. To be a steward of our gifts is to identify and develop them, that they might be used to God's best glory and for the up-building of the church.

We are all blessed to be able to give of ourselves, and we all have something useful to contribute...and if anyone does not participate, then the body does function as well. Even the loss of just a little toenail will cause the whole body to limp; so too this body, this congregation, cannot get along just as well without you.

As you heard the call of Jeremiah, was it simply a story about the past to you or do these verses speak to you about circumstances you face today? Are you being called? Are you listening? Are you timid and fearful? Do you find yourself saying: "I can't, I have no time, I have no energy, it's not my job"?

My prayer for the coming months is that each of you, carefully consider, pray seriously, and ask God to reveal new ways, new opportunities and places where you can serve; to show you afresh how each of you can best please and honor our God, who loves us and wants only the best for us and for this world.

May it be so. AMEN