

“All for One” a sermon by the Rev. Keenan Kelsey 2/7/2010  
Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church USA

TEXT: 1 Corinthians 12: 12-26 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 honourable we clothe with greater honour, 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 honour 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 honoured, all rejoice together with it. 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.

CRAIG’S LIST ran the following help wanted ad: "Need co-author for a book on self-reliance."

I think that must have been the mindset of the Christian community in Corinth. This church was torn with factionalism, competition, jealousy, posturing, even some distorted teaching and misuse of spiritual gifts. Many self-reliant believers claimed superiority over others— but these same self-appointed elite sure seemed to need “co-authors,” either to align with or to lord it over!

We Americans are the most individualistic people on earth. We celebrate the loner and the non-conformist. We are suspicious of groups and institutions. Frank Sinatra crooned “I did it my way.” Yet – America boasts more self defined loneliness than any nation in the world.

I read an article recently that said loneliness can be as contagious as a cold or as H1 N1. "Loneliness spreads across time," writes Dr. John Cacioppo, neuroscientist, psychologist and one of the authors "It travels through people" he says." But it's transmitted through our behaviors instead of by a germ." Lonely individuals tend to move to the fringes of social networks where they have fewer and fewer friends. But before they move to the periphery, as they withdraw, they "infect" or "transmit" their feelings of loneliness to their remaining friends. Others wonder about their own worth and their place, and their own isolation may follow.

Surely the church at Corinth had both sides of the problem: self important individuals and people increasingly pushed to the edges. Does it sound uncomfortably contemporary? "While loneliness can be contagious," Dr. Cacioppo says "it's important to note it's not a disease, nor is it a personal weakness. It's actually a biological reaction, much like hunger or thirst or pain. We need quality relationships in our lives. We don't survive well on our own." Cyberspace and virtual reality notwithstanding, we are better together. Hard-wired to be in community.

An elderly woman went to the federal building to apply for her very first passport. The clerk told her that she would have to take the loyalty oath first. "Raise your right hand, please," he said. The lady did as she was told. "Do you swear to defend the Constitution of the United States against all its enemies, foreign or domestic?" he asked. The woman hesitated and turned pale. She leaned toward the clerk and asked in a trembling voice, "Uhhh . . . all by myself?"

Not only do we not have to do herculean tasks by ourselves, it is not God's vision for us. Paul's great description of the human body hammers home that each of us is necessary for the good of the Body of Christ.

Imagine yourself driving down Divisidero. It's pretty difficult with all the road work going on. Imagine, as you are bogged down at a stoplight you see a man digging a deep hole in the center divide. He moves on and starts another hole, and behind him comes a man who begins to fill it up. You call out, "What are you doing? How is that helping anything?" Imagine the worker answering, "We're on the beautification team. We're planting trees down the center of the street, only the guy who plants the trees called in sick today."

Every person has a gift and a part. If we get so focused on our own gifts and our own tasks, we might forget to plant the trees. Without an appreciation of every part of the job, nothing will grow at all. If we have people who feel lonely, inferior, inadequate, anxious and unhappy, we will all suffer. If we have know-it-alls who flaunt their gifts and talk over or correct others, we will all suffer. We are a mixed bag of the necessary.

This is more than tolerance.. Stephen Carter in his work, *The Culture of Disbelief*, has noted, "Tolerance without respect means little." If we tolerate someone's spiritual gift, then it is our forbearance, not our recognition of the equality, that allows the person possessing it to be a part of the church. Toleration means simply allowing something to exist. For many people the idea of toleration is bound up with the notion that those with different spiritual gifts will, in time, come to confess the error of their ways. Way deep down, behind the flowing pen of his composition, Paul's is a clarion call for respect. We are asked to honor one another and one another's gifts.

Jewish Midrash says, If two sit together and the words between them are of Torah, then the Shechinah (God's glory) is in their midst. The Koran writes: And when a company meets together in one of the houses of God to pore over the Book of God and to study it together among themselves, the Shechinah comes down to them and mercy overshadows them, the angels surround them, and God remembers them among them that are His.

The rich, direct language of Ghana has this proverb: It is because one antelope will blow the dust from the other's eye that two antelopes walk together. And from Nigeria: The pebbles are the strength of the wall.

And in our own Christian tradition: Matthew says Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand.

Can you be a Christian all by yourself? Paul's answer is a firm "no." Many of us have forged ahead without friends or help or support – horrors often even without committees! Yet our Presbyterian system, our use of committee and consensus, reflects our conviction that the Spirit works through prayer and through community. There is no room for envy or guilt or comparison or boasting or preening. There is only room for relationship.

There is only room in God's world for a loving community where we forgive each other, when we give up long-standing grudges and when we reach out in kindness to those who have wronged us. As the Gospel reading reminded us, the Christian life moves beyond the impossible task of trying to love people we do not like, to the joyous hope of living in the Spirit. Jesus' message to us is not primarily about avoiding bad things or doing good things. Jesus' word is that we can live in the Spirit in which Jesus lived. The practice of friendship and honor and respect is as contagious as loneliness is infectious.

On July 24, 2002, nine miners in western Pennsylvania became trapped 240 feet below ground in a flooded mine shaft. Rescue efforts began immediately, but the rescue crews knew the odds were against them saving all the men. Amazingly, however, all nine miners survived the ordeal. These men claim that it was their decision to bond together that saved their lives. From the outset of the danger, the men watched out for one another. They tied themselves together, so that no one could float away or slip under the water. If one man got tired, his bond to the other men kept him afloat. The miners vowed that whether they lived or died, they would do so together.

The members of the church become the body of Christ by using our gifts to help one another. God gave each of us unique and multifaceted gifts so that together we could create a dynamic, interdependent, effective community. Where one member is weak, another member is strong. We all have something to offer, and this keeps us humble. We need each other. All of us have our individual gifts, and each of us has his or her place. None of us is any more important or less important than anyone else.

May it be so for us.