

WHAT KEEPS THE BODY UNITED
Eph. 4: 11-16 and Col. 2: 18-19

October 28, 2013

This morning's scripture likens our congregation to a body.
It suggests that each one of you is a different body part,
and together we function, grow, move, and work
as an organic whole that is far greater than any one of us.
It challenges us to think of our distinct functions
as a special gift we bring to God and to each other.
Just like the eye or ear or hand are different,
yet very necessary to our human body,
so, too, each one of you is important to our church body.
This is such a simple and universal image
that we all can immediately understand it.
But just as our bodies are such complex organisms
that much about them still remains a mystery,
so this image continues to challenge us.

If we look at the image from one direction it stresses diversity,
but if we look at it from the other direction, it also stresses unity.
What happens if the many unique and wonderful parts of the body,
are not working together?

Imagine a body with its many parts uncoordinated by the brain.
What if your two feet decided to walk off in different directions?
Or what if your two hands decided to reach for different things?
What would it be like if your eyes looked in opposite directions,
or if your heart refused to speed up when you needed
extra oxygen to run?

Sometimes these things do happen to us
when there is an interruption of the brain signals
to our body for one reason or another.

Then we experience the frustration of our bodies not being in sync.
What makes our bodies work in such an amazing way
is that most of the time the different parts work together
as they get their directions from the brain.

It makes us an amazing working whole that can move with purpose
and direction and unity.

Not only is Paul celebrating the diversity of gifts and personalities
that each of you brings to our church body,

Paul is also saying that what makes us a WORKING body,
is that we are all connected to the same head, the same brain.
We are all getting our instructions from the same command center.
That is what enables us as a diverse group of people
to function together and become a living unit
that moves in the same direction and for the same purpose.

Paul says if we don't stay connected to the brain (which is Christ),
we get off track.

To bring this point home, he starts using other metaphors.
Our church body starts meandering off course
like a ship blown about in a storm.

We stop thriving and maturing,
start to function like children when we
should be acting like adults.

The wonderful diversity of the body has been rendered useless
by the refusal of the parts to work together as a whole.

The living organism is pulling itself in pieces
by each going its own way instead of doing its part
for the well-being and functioning of the whole body.

Today we could add what we know about cancer--
one kind of cell takes over at that expense of other cells
and disrupts the body's healthy balance.

Or, to use another image, we could talk about a team.

This week many of you have watched the World Series.

The best baseball team not only had the best players,
but also were the best coordinated as a TEAM.

That is true of any team: football, basketball, volleyball, soccer—
any sports team you can think of.

Or a music group: an orchestra, band, choir.

Each player contributes to the goals of the group,
getting their directions from a coach or a director.

I remember well an incident when I was in 8th grade.

Our little two-room school was playing another country school
in basketball.

All at once, one of our boys grabbed the basketball,
dribbled down the court, and made a perfect shot.

But it was the wrong basket.

He was going in the wrong direction
and scored for the opposing team.
Was it a good play? YES.
Was his talent needed on the team? YES.
But he had forgotten the instructions of the coach,
the commonly understood rules of the game,
and the team suffered.

We here at Faith have many different gifts & personalities.
What makes us function in life-giving and healthy ways
is when we each stay in touch with the same coach
and get our directions from the head.
And for us in the church, that coach, that head, is Christ.
It is Jesus who keeps us together and going in the same direction.

One of the basic tenets of group theory is that
all groups need common goals in order to function effectively.
We all need to have some agreed upon standards,
some common vision and understandings
of how we relate to each other and do our work together.
That's why we have constitutions, handbooks, and vision statements.
But if that is all we have, we are simply a secular organization.
The church is something more organic and alive.
We have a long and tested body of scripture in the Bible.
We have the living Spirit of Christ to guide us.

Paul says that our goal, the thing we are all to be working toward,
is to be building each other up so that we can all grow
to become more like Jesus.
Jesus is our model, our leader, our coach, our brain.
In the middle of our Ephesians passage,
Paul warns us against following people
who are crafty and deceitful, who scheme and plan
to get their own way.
These people do not build up the body.
They are more interested in their own opinions
and their own way of doing things.
They are like the leg that walks off in the opposite direction
or the basketball player who puts the ball in the opponent's hoop.

In the Colossians passage Paul warns us against getting caught up
in judging people because they don't follow the fine print
and forget the main point.
He mentions people who get caught up in rules about food & festivals
instead of concentrating on what it means to follow Jesus.
"WE NEED TO HOLD FAST TO THE HEAD," he says.
We dare not start going our own directions,
splintering off into factions, making up our own rules,
and cutting off those we don't like or with whom we disagree.
Again, Paul's point is that we need to be team players,
following the coach or the head so that
we build up the team or the body.
That is the essence of what it means to follow Jesus.
Because Jesus, as the head, has no favorites
and always wants the best for ALL of us.

This week I read about a sixth century teacher from Gaza
who preached a sermon for the monks of his monastery.
Evidently they were grumbling that they were unable
to love God properly because they had to put up
with one another's ordinary, irritating presence.
"No," the teacher told them. "You are wrong."
Instead he asked them to visualize the world as a great circle.
At the center of that circle is God,
and we humans stand along the circumference of that circle.
"Imagine now," he told them,
"That there are straight lines connecting each person
on the outside of the circle to God at the center.
Can't you see that there is no way to move toward God
without drawing closer to other people,
and no way to approach other people without coming near to God?"

Yes, whether it is a body or a circle,
we are connected through God, in Jesus,
who is the head or the center,
When we are both getting our directions from the same place
and speaking to each other from our unique perspectives,
we promote the growth and well-being of the church.

I have learned more from the ways people are different from me,

than from the ways they are alike.
My limited perspectives haven't always understood or valued
others ways of thinking and being,
but when I can listen and learn from those differences,
I have become a much more whole person.
The ways I have learned to treasure my family the most
are that ways they are different from me,
because I have had to work so hard to understand
their ways of viewing and living in the world.
And when I have been able to love without fear,
to listen without attack, to learn without defense,
my heart has been stretched
and I have grown one more step in Christ-likeness.

What is true in our biological families is also true in our church family.
When we are willing to speak the truth in love to each other,
to share and value our differences,
we will find ourselves growing, stretching,
and being nourished by each other.
In Paul's words, "We build each other up."
We can withhold neither our voice nor our ears.

But when we cut ourselves off,
try to manipulate things to go our direction,
judge one another and lay petty burdens on each other,
we damage both ourselves and the whole body.
The body is not built up, but torn down.

I am humbled this morning by the fact that this still doesn't answer
some of our most difficult and divisive issues.
What do we hear Jesus saying?
We don't all answer that question the same.
However, beyond any specific answers to specific questions,
I believe Jesus calls us to love and respect each voice.
As we do that, I believe we can move together
to a deeper and more profound answer.

