

Called as Partners in Christ's Service: The Heart of the Partnership

1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 12-27

Georgetown Presbyterian Church

November 15, 2009

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins

The human body really is an incredible organism, when you think about it. So many systems, organs, and parts all acting in concert with one another—it is mind-boggling when you think about everything that has to be working just right in order for the body to function. Even if you try to simplify it and categorize the body's functions into major systems, it's still more than you can wrap your mind around.

It's been a long time since I have studied any of the sciences (remember, I failed chemistry in college, thus putting an end to any medical or scientific pursuits). And so instead of trying to remember my high school biology and remedial anatomy, I did what most any modern-minded adult would do today to find information—I Googled. I Googled the human body, and the first page that came up was one that took me through ten internal systems in the human body: the skeletal system, the digestive system, the muscular system, the lymphatic system, the endocrine system, the nervous system, the cardiovascular system, the male and female reproductive systems, and the urinary system.

Then I clicked on the one I thought might be the most simple one to understand—the skeletal system. After all, how complicated can bones get? But then in the skeletal system I discovered terms like interosseous membrane, iliolumbar ligament, xiphoid process of sternum, the medial malleolus. When I saw that there was a bone called the humerus, I assumed that it must be the funny bone... but it's not. Suddenly the skeletal system became much more complex than I had previously assumed.

In terms of the digestive system, I assumed that you basically have the stomach, the large intestine and the small intestine, and then a few other ancillary organs to fill the space. But even the large intestine, or the colon, is divided into several parts: you have the ascending colon, the descending colon, the sigmoid colon, the transverse colon. Suddenly the digestive system became much more complex than I had previously assumed.

My point is this: The human body is an incredibly complex organism. To think of all the systems that have to be working just right in coordination with one another, just to do simple tasks—it blows the mind. Do you know how many things need to be working together just to clench a fist? Or blink your eyes? Or taste the sweetness of sweet tea? The human body is incredibly complex.

The complexity of the human body is what makes Paul's description of the church such a brilliant one. "The body is a unit," he notes, "though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body..."¹ Paul says the church is the body of Christ, likening the church to a human body with many parts. And in order for the whole body to perform as it is supposed to perform, every part must do what it is designed to do.

And with the analogy that Paul draws between the human body and the body of Christ—the church—Paul strikes at the very heart of the partnership in the gospel that you and I share. For you see, just as every part of the human body must perform its own particular function in order for the whole body to work right, so does every member of the body of Christ have something to contribute to the ministry of the whole.

Every part of the body has something to contribute to the whole. Every member of the body of Christ, the church, has something that he or she can offer for the strengthening of the ministry Christ calls us to carry out in his name. Paul helps us understand the importance that each part plays in the functioning of the whole by saying two things.

¹1 Corinthians 12:12-13a

The first thing Paul says is that no part of the body can say of itself, "I don't matter." "If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' [the foot] would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' [the ear] would not for that reason cease to be part of the body."² Don't you see—Paul is cautioning us against thinking that any of us is unimportant. Every part of the body has a special role to play, a special function to carry out. Earlier in this chapter Paul notes that some in the body of Christ will teach, while others will carry out ministries of healing, while still others will play a role of discernment. What he's saying here is that those who teach are no less a part of the body of Christ as those who play the role of discernment, and vice-versa.

Here at Georgetown Presbyterian Church some will serve on Session as elders, others will volunteer with the Hispanic Ministry; some will help out in the kitchen, others will sing in the choir; some will usher on Sunday morning, and others will serve communion; some will teach Sunday school, and others will bring canned goods for the food pantry. And some will do more than one of these things. Whatever role you play, you must not consider yourself any less a part of the body of Christ than anyone else, just because some may be doing something that is more visible or dynamic. No part of the body of Christ has a right to say they don't belong.

You matter in the body of Christ. You are an important part of our partnership in the gospel.

The second way that Paul underscores the importance of every part of the body of Christ is by saying that one part cannot think of another as dispensable. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'"³ You see, God has created the church and called the church into being in such a way that we need each other. The preacher cannot say he doesn't need the usher; nor can the usher say she doesn't need the Sunday school teacher; nor can the Sunday school teacher say she doesn't need the kitchen volunteers. The truth is, we all need each other; none is indispensable in the body of Christ. No one can say to another, "You're not necessary."

If you want proof of this, just try to do without part of your body, and see whether or not your body does as well without the part. Try to write without using your thumb. Or try to taste without also smelling. Or try to eat a steak without teeth. Or try to keep your head warm without hair (ok, some of you get that one!). A couple of weeks ago Bo Barron hurt his shoulder in a bike accident. Just a minor injury to a small joint. But because of that injury Bo had to immobilize his whole arm in a sling. And without the use of that arm, Bo was greatly limited in what he could do. Simple tasks like tying a shoe suddenly became enormous obstacles.

Don't you see—it doesn't matter which part you are in the body of Christ, because every part is important. The body of Christ needs you. The body of Christ is not whole if every part is not able to do what it is designed to do. If one part suffers, the whole body suffers. Our ministry is incomplete when some of the parts aren't doing what they've been designed to do.

That's why I'm so emphatic that stewardship is about partnership, about collaborative ministry in which each of us has a part to play. Stewardship is not just a matter of the checks you write on Sunday morning; it is a matter of how we use all the gifts that God has put at our disposal. Stewardship is about recognizing the things that God has made possible for us to do and be, and using it all to serve God's purpose and to glorify God.

The beauty of it all is that God has given us the tools we need to carry out our work in the body of Christ. God has equipped us to do the very things God has called us to do. "To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good," says Paul.⁴ That means that each of us is endowed in some special way by the Holy Spirit. We are endowed individually, but not simply for our own personal edification. We are endowed for the good of the greater whole. The gifts we have are not for us to keep unto ourselves, but in the service of Christ through the ministry of the body of Christ.

In our lesson from Exodus this morning, there were some very specific things that needed to be done in the work of the tabernacle. Some very specific skills were needed for the craftsmanship necessary for the

²1 Corinthians 12:15-16

³1 Corinthians 12:21

⁴1 Corinthians 12:7

construction of the tabernacle. And so we are told about Bezalel and Oholiab, and how they had the necessary skills. But critical is how we understand the source of their skills. For you see, it doesn't say that Bezalel and Oholiab developed those skills on their own. What does it say? It says that the Lord had filled them with the Spirit of God, that the Lord had filled them with skill, ability, and knowledge.⁵ And Bezalel and Oholiab used the gifts and the skills and the abilities and the knowledge they were given, and they used it for the purpose for which God had endowed them with those gifts.

"To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." The challenge is for us to discover the ways that God's Spirit has equipped us to fulfill our role in the body of Christ. We do that by considering some of the skills and gifts we have. Sometimes an obvious talent comes to the surface that we can put to use for the glory of God. Sometimes it is a passion for some specific ministry. Sometimes it is noticing a need that must be filled and discovering that there is something we can do to help fill that need.

Next Sunday is Dedication Sunday. Before next Sunday, I hope you will give prayerful consideration to your role in our partnership in Christ's ministry. I hope you will consider what God is calling you to give to the ministry of this church, both in terms of your money and yourself. Think about ways that God is calling you to do your part in the body of Christ. Then fill out your covenant sheet and put it in the envelope with your name and address on it; seal the envelope, because your covenant is between you and God. Also fill out the volunteer information forms, indicating your desire to do your part in the ministry of the body of Christ. Then bring your covenants and your volunteer forms to the church next week, and as a whole we will dedicate ourselves anew to the glory and service of God through the ministries of Georgetown Presbyterian Church.

You matter in the body of Christ. You are an important part of our partnership in the gospel.

Together we are called to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Together we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves.

The key is what we do together. For WE are the body of Christ, and each one of us is a part of it. WE are the essence of the partnership in the gospel. Without the WE, there is no partnership. Amen.

⁵See Exodus 35:30-35