

“One Body, Many Members”
delivered Sunday, January 24, 2010
by Rev. Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor
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1 Corinthians 12:12-31
Annual Meeting Sunday

The image of the church as a body is a wonderful and familiar reminder of our interconnectedness and dependence upon one another. The foot and the hand, the ear and the eye, all the vital organs – each part so varied and distinct, but all necessary for the working of the whole. So too, the church, filled with a great variety of people and gifts, and yet, by God’s grace, it functions as one body – to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Ministry Chair cannot say to the Youth Group Leader, “I have no need of you,” when the McDonald Youth Center is bursting at the seams with youth on Sunday evening. The Handbell player cannot say to the Extended Care volunteer, “I have no need of you,” when it takes 17 volunteers to keep up with all our preschoolers during worship every Sunday. The Church School Teacher cannot say, “I do not need the volunteer serving the homeless at the Washington Street Soup Kitchen,” when that person is bearing witness to what we teach. We all understand how interdependent we are with such an array of gifts for ministry, and with 206 bones and 639 muscles along with the ligaments, veins, cartilage and all the rest, the image of a body is just perfect for a church as large as this one! (1) Every time we hear a sound, or take a step, or breath, hundreds of different parts work together so that what we experience is a single movement.

So it is with this church blessed with so many gifts, generously shared in service to the body of Christ, the church. The Annual Report which will be distributed at our meeting after worship and made available to any who would like a copy, as brief a summary as it is, demonstrates how gifted and active this body of Shandon Presbyterian Church really is. Look at it and you can see there is much to celebrate about the growth and vitality of our ministry together, and also read between the lines, putting the faces of individuals beside those listed activities, and you will discover that what it means to be a part of this Shandon community is ultimately immeasurable. The hallway conversation with a church friend who lends support during a difficult time, the weekly ministry of the prayer chain who have covenanted quietly to take shared concerns to God in prayer, the joy of having a place from which to serve our neighbors in need, the call to make music, the need for the company of one another. Paul’s image of the church as a highly gifted and interconnected body resonates through this congregation. Each of us is important to our ministry even as all of us together, varied and unique, are members of the one body of Christ.

Now, when the body is functioning just fine, we don’t think too much about individual parts. But sprain a thumb and all of the sudden your fingers cannot do what they are meant to do either. Try walking when your inner ear is all messed up, and you realize it’s not enough to have legs and feet; we also need our inner gyroscope to tell us which way is up. (2) When the body is perfectly healthy we move gracefully as a unified whole through our days, but when a part is hurt the soreness ripples through our interdependent parts.

And so on the Annual Meeting day of celebration for our unity as a church, the scripture also invites us to recognize that the variety in a community is a challenge as well as blessing. There are always members in a church deeply invested in one particular area of ministry who don’t value another’s involvement as they value their own. Frequently, it is in the allocation of

financial resources that surfaces these differences. When the boiler needs to be replaced the outreach people groan, and when a new mission arises calling for immediate attention, there are some who grumble that the education budget hasn't budged in years. Like every other church I know we have perennial disagreements about these things – we do not all think alike- but we are called to honor our differences. And we are called to trust the process that we make better decisions together – than any individual could make alone. That too is a celebration of Annual Meeting Sunday, our Presbyterian heritage of the priesthood of all believers. Pastors are called by the whole congregation rather than appointed by any individual; elders are elected by the congregation to lead, trusting the work of the Holy Spirit within the community to set the budget, to determine the mission to chart the church's direction together.

Paul's letter to the early church at Corinth is always a good word for us. There was great diversity in the church in Corinth, a community made up of different ethnic, theological and socio-economic backgrounds. Corinth was an international city, dominated by an upper class of mostly Italians, and there was an influx of Greeks, Asians, and Jews who comprised a lower, working class. Paul was in Corinth long enough to begin several house churches, but not long enough to provide stability for such a diverse community of believers. Their diversity gave rise to conflict and tension which is evident in Paul's letters. There were differing opinions about matters of human sexuality, about what to eat, about displaying the gifts of the Spirit in worship, about the role of women in the church, about freedom and communal responsibility, about the meaning of the resurrection. To them, and to us, Paul says: Our diversity is a gift from God, we each have a role to play...and not only that, the smallest, seemingly inferior roles deserve the greatest respect. By the power of Christ in our midst, our diverse multiplicity of gifts manifests itself as one big, beautiful, unified movement of a living body.

Liz Forney is a Presbyterian pastor in Tennessee. She tells the story of a little girl she knows who had saved up her allowance to an all time high of \$12. When she heard her mother was going to the grocery store she begged to be taken along so she could find something to buy worthy of the money she had collected. Up and down the aisle they went, passing by candy and donuts and toys and books, considering possible investments for the child's jackpot of cash in her little pink purse. Nothing really made the cut. As they were leaving the store there was a group of folks playing some music and collecting donations to build a new church in their small town. Their collection buckets had a drawing of what their church was going to look like. As a regular attender of Sunday school herself, the music and pictures caught the child's eye. Slowly her hand went to the purse and she pulled out the tiny roll of one dollar bills. Her mother held her breath wondering if she'd count off one or two, but the child put the whole wad in there at once, and smiling broadly, rejoined her mother to push their grocery cart to their car. "Why did you pick that to spend your money on?" the mother asked. Without missing a beat the child answered simply, "I wanted to see what God would do." (3)

With the Annual Meeting today, as we celebrate where we have been, and dream about where we are going, I hope you will remember that little girl. When you put in your hour here and your hour there; when you give your little wad of cash here and write the big check there; when you take notice of the gift that God has given you and give it to the ministry of Shandon, when you wonder whether you are an eye or an ear, a hand or a knee, a rib or a lung, I hope you will remember that little girl who gave everything she had away just to see what God could do. Not one of us is more important than any other, but together, we are the body of Christ. With all the gifts we have to offer, let's just see what God can do. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Feasting on the Word, Year C. Vol. 1, p. 279.
- 2) Barbara Brown Taylor, used this analogy in one of her sermons, citation lost.
- 3) Liz Forney, "Are You All In?" Central Presbyterian, Atlanta, 11/5/2006