

Oneness

Oneness you would think is a simple concept. But there is more division over that seemingly simple idea than what many term much more complex ideas. For example, how we understand our one Triune God is but one of many of these seemingly endless confusions which can arise around this concept of oneness. And the text which we read last week certainly contained the word one and the concept of oneness in abundance—In fact, I began last week speaking about the three things Paul wanted to make clear to the Corinthians about the One Spirit of God. To recap, I said Paul listed these things he was trying to teach them as: all gifts come from the same God, all people are given gifts by this one God and that even though the gifts may be varied, they are given for a single purpose—the benefit of the whole body of Christ—all the believers. In other words: there may be many gifts but there is One God, and there is One purpose for the many gifts and they are given for one body of believers, who all belong to the one God. In that teaching there are three examples of oneness, each of which would have seemed strange to the Corinthians. And that image of the one body of Christ is the theme of this morning's text. This image of the church as a body, or more specifically as the body of Christ is a well-known one for anyone who has grown up in the Christian church. This is so much a part of our heritage, especially as we read the letter of Paul to the Corinthians that it is easy to have the mistaken idea that the image of a group of people forming a body is a uniquely Christian concept. However, this idea had already been circulated before Paul's letters. To be precise, Marcus Agrippa, a Roman Consul in the time of Julius Caesar made the connection between the state politic and the human body before Christ was born. This image was also used by a contemporary of Paul's, Plutarch, to make the same point about there being many parts within a society but his analogy carried came with a different context and meaning, one more closely derived from the contemporary culture. Since Paul's image is freshest in our minds, I will begin 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." When we look at each other, or when we look at ourselves in a mirror, it is easy to distinguish that our body is not a uniform shape or structure. There is a central area, the torso. Then there are some protrusions—limbs—arms, legs, neck, head—and even these protrusions have protrusions—fingers, toes, ears, noses. Since mirrors were not really that available to the Corinthians, but they could easily look at each other, they too could see of what Paul was speaking when he told them that their body was a unit had many pieces which were connected. That is always the easy part of the image to establish. The difficult part for the Corinthians to grasp was that last phrase—"so it is with Christ." Paul continues, "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." The many portion of their group would have been easy for them to visualize as Corinth was a large cosmopolitan port city. Paul had shared the gospel news to all and many had received it. However, this being or becoming one in any sense would have been almost impossible for them to grasp because no matter what their particular ethnic region of origin, which could be quite varied, it would have had indeed had one thing in common—it would have been stratified—it would have been based on a strict hierarchical structure which was

the pervasive building block of the Greco-Roman world. The Greco-Roman world perfectly fit the model of the saying a place for everything and everything in its place for there was no place for movement in that world. There were no connections between those who occupied the different places, so there was no concern for members of the varied groups. So when Paul began speaking of there being dependence between and among the various members of the community—like the health and well being of the whole physical body depending upon individual members—it was a rather foreign concept. When Paul said, “If the foot would 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.” I am sure his audience could see his logic when looking at their body. I am not sure if they could see what that meant in terms of how it would work in their relationships with other people. When looking at the extremities like hands and feet, dependence or rather inter-dependence may not be so obvious. But Paul continues with the various body parts supposedly saying things to other members of the body, “And if the ear would 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 of the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be?” It is when the function of the individual parts is considered that the importance of there being differences becomes apparent for the well being of the whole. That is what Paul is saying to the Corinthians in this text as he draws his analogy to the body and its various members to a close. “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.’” Eyes, ears, hands, feet, head, and various body parts and functions not mentioned all need to work together to make the whole body function. This analogy begins as a way to bring these people from different cultures and life experiences with different gifts together into a community who can use their different gifts together for the benefit of all without seeking status for having a more “valuable gift” to offer than another has because all gifts serve a need. The Corinthians had trouble understanding that this variety of gifts did not make the gifts like the Roman society. The gifts were not given to make the recipients into another hierarchy—although diverse, the gifts were equal in the sense that they were given because they served a need for the community—they were not given to establish rank but to provide service. The gifts were given to bind these various members into a unit—a community—a body—the body of Christ—a part of the family of God. This was counter cultural for the Greco-Roman world ranked everything. As Paul concludes his analogy he makes this statement: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” At the heart of Paul’s message is the concept that everyone who is in the congregation—no matter their origin—is now connected to one another and that what each one of them has to offer matters. That was message was a reversal of the message which their culture—that of the Greco-Roman world had taught them. Remember that this image of the correlation between the body politic and its members and the human body had been used before and was in fact being currently used in another context for with a different conclusion? Plutarch used the same image of members of society to discuss them in terms of plebeians and Patricians. Patricians were at the top of the hierarchical pile and were valuable while plebeians were in the lower echelon and of less

or no value. When I read articles and hear the news today, I wonder if we have forgotten Paul's analogy of the body and adapted that of Plutarch. In Plutarch's version and that of the Greco-Roman world there was no connection between the various members of the body—one group could look at what was happening to another group and not be affected. The culture which dominates our lives is that of the American way—it is based on capitalism, independence and individualism. These are three things which also place a high value on oneness, but a oneness which separates. The oneness of which our scriptures speak is very different—even our One God is not single, but is Triune. Our One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit draws us together in community—into the one body of Christ with many members—members who are to be connected—who are to love and care for one another and for the whole world. The gift of connected oneness given to us through being in the one body of Christ is precious. Let us hold onto and celebrate that Oneness of community. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.