

The Whole Body
January 21, 2007
1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a
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It was somewhere around 54 A.D. when the very committed and strong-in-personality leader of the early church named Paul wrote the no-nonsense letter that we just heard a portion of this morning. Paul, then at a distance from Corinth, had heard that divisions and disagreements were going on in this church that he had helped to establish. In fact, this letter we call *First Corinthians* was probably not the first letter he had written to that church. There had been something of a correspondence going on, and we do have two letters to this church preserved in our scriptures—a portion of Paul's side of the conversation. These letters are great historical treasures, two windows into the life of an early Christian community, and perhaps, in some ways, a distant mirror image of some features of life in some churches today, all these years later.

Folks, there were problems in that church in Corinth! Corinth was a busy city full of trade—largely a slave trade—and a city in which many cultures and their attendant religious traditions were mixed. Some of the wealthier members of the church at Corinth were evidently behaving in ways that were not good for the whole community. Some were claiming that they had reached some sort of superior level of wisdom and spirituality. People who had begun speaking in tongues in worship were claiming that they had reached spiritual perfection. There were even abuses at the Lord's Supper—the Corinthian church members gathered in sub-groups in homes, and sometimes it was tough to fit everyone in one room. Higher status folks often ended up getting the best seats and the better food, while poorer members were put more at a distance—say out in the courtyard—and served the leftovers. There were even people allowing themselves to get drunk during the Lord's Supper! Then there were those church members had come to the conclusion that the spiritual life was so much more important than the physical life that it didn't much matter what you did with your body, so there was a certain amount of sexual impropriety going on. There were also disagreements about dietary issues. In short, there were ethical problems playing out, and divisions about worship. What we heard today was part of Paul's eloquent and forceful response as their pastor, a response quite radical for its time.

Which brings us to our church here...in a good way! It is a joy to declare that the First Congregational Church of Wakefield appears to be in better shape than its ancient predecessor in Corinth! To a person new to this community of faith, the strength, commitment, love and graciousness of this community of faith is very apparent. A special gift of the church seems to be that there is a wide tolerance for various points of view, even an enjoyment of different perspectives and the humor that can spring from that. It appears that often when folks disagree, they seem to get it out on the table in a healthy way. If you are a visitor here today, and you are looking for a church, you might want to snag this one in a hurry, because it truly is a wonderful community of faith. Like the quilts on display here, made of beautiful individual fabrics all put together to form one warm, useful, lovely piece, this congregation is made up of wonderfully and differently gifted individuals, forming a caring body. The thread that holds us together is the love of God in Christ Jesus, and we are here to love God, one another, and the world

as best we can. Like the quilts, we are a bit care-worn at times, and not perfect; we need mending here and there and sometimes we need a patch, but this as a community is lovely and of immeasurable value.

At Corinth, the church was made up of slaves and free men and women, artisans, small business people, and merchants. Some were very poor and obviously marginalized, while others were people of means and status. With the cultural mixing in Corinth that brought in a variety of religious influences, the varied status of the church members, and the practice of gathering in small spaces, it's not difficult to see why problems arose. Paul's letter takes all these issues and confronts them with a radically egalitarian vision of a community that is one in Christ. Paul challenges them-- admonishes them-- to dissolve their differences in the waters of their baptisms and to place their connection to one another in Christ above their social divisions. *For in 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.* With this language, Paul radically challenged the social order and called the church to a new standard of relationship; he took the side of the weak and the poor and the foolish, and admonished the powerful. Such words were not without risk, nor are they today. As a colleague once put it, “this kind of talk will eventually get a person killed.” Indeed, later on, this may have been true for Paul—and certainly for Jesus and for others across history, this has sadly been the case. These radical words beckoning us to be one in Christ have come to us across the centuries at a very high price, and they are treasures to live by, foundations of our faith as Christians.

As we look around the sanctuary today, we see a room full of spiritually gifted people. Among us here are gifted pie bakers, brownie makers, and cooks. We have idea people, and people who are good at fixing things that break, and we have those who can build things. There are folks who have a passion for social justice and folks who will be the first at your bedside if you end up in the hospital. Some here are great leaders, and some prefer to work quietly behind the scenes. There are singers, worship leaders, Sunday school teachers, folks who love to push the envelope, and folks who treasure tradition and find inspiration in orthodoxy. Some here will open their homes to all comers. You'll find church members working at the food pantry, traveling to visit our sister church in Zimbabwe, and serving with distinction in the wider church. We have folks who manage finances beautifully and we have artists in our midst. So many gifts, so many talents. So many differences! These differences need not be a stumbling block; in fact, they can be a continuing source of strength if we root our connections in God's love. After all, we are not one body because we all agree, or because we all like the same things, or because we all think the same way. We are one whole body because of God's grace. And if we can keep it that way, with all our gifts, all our weaknesses, and all our differences, we will be one little slice of heaven on earth. *Now you are the body of Christ and individually the members of it,* Paul wrote. *If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.* It does appear that there is indeed a good amount of that spirit going around here. May it ever be so, with God's help!

Amen.