

1 Corinthians 12:4-26(NRSV)

⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

¹²For 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. ¹³For 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.

¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If 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. ¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The 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.” ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Though God has given us all different talents and gifts, it is the same God who has formed us into one body. Each of us is indispensable. The contributions of all are to be honored and respected. This is the unity to which Christ calls us.

Steve Martin and Lily Tomlin’s 1984 movie, “All of Me,” is a funny movie. Lily Tomlin plays Edwina Cutwater, a very rich woman who doesn't want to die. She finds another woman willing to accept her soul, but a mistake during the "operation" sends Edwina's soul directly into the body of Roger Cobb, a passing lawyer. To make matters worse, she takes over only half of Roger’s body. Thus, Edwina controls one arm and one leg while Roger controls the other arm and leg. Needless to say, with Edwina and Roger in charge, the poor fellow’s arms and legs are not all pulling in the same direction. Steve Martin’s gift for physical comedy is on full display as he portrays a man whose limbs have minds of their own.

One body, many members

I wonder if the apostle Paul would find the movie all that funny, or if it would hit a little too close to home. Today’s passage from one of Paul’s letters to the believers in Corinth reveals that they were too much like Edwina/Roger, with the various limbs/members¹ pulling in different directions. Paul doesn’t see unity in Corinth, much less unity of purpose. Instead, he sees a community divided and consumed by social status. Let me explain.

Most of us quickly grasp several of Paul’s points in this passage.

1. First, we humans are a diverse bunch. Though there is much in our humanness that we share, we all know quite well that there is a wide range of personalities, experiences, and values that threaten to divide even the smallest groups.

¹Our modern use of the word “member” as in “one who belongs to,” is based on this older meaning of a body limb or organ.

2. Second, we know that God has given us a variety of gifts. Whether we call them gifts or talents², we know that some are good at one thing, others at another. I'm pretty good talking in front of groups. My wife is the one that you'd want caring for you during a difficult time.
3. Third, I think we understand that these various gifts make our community stronger. To use Paul's body metaphor, the eye needs the hand which needs the foot. The body needs them all. Our diversity is a benefit – so long as it is lived out in love and in unity of purpose.

But when Paul begins talking about members that seem to be weaker or seem to be less honorable (v. 23-24), his meaning becomes unclear. In part, this is because Paul is trying to be polite in his use of the body metaphor. But it is also because we live in a different culture than did Paul and the believers.

Rev. Michael Reeves on our part

In South Louisiana there is a wonderful word called "lagniappe" which means a little extra. Another phrase that describes this is "baker's dozen" which means a dozen plus one extra. These come from Gestalt psychology – it is the understanding that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts – the word that best describes this in practice is synergy. The idea that when all of the parts work together in a united way, there is an unlimited result. That is seen from a theological point of view in 1 Corinthians 12:1-31. Paul uses the strong visual image of the human body to describe the church. He spends the first few verses identifying the diversity of the gifts and the unity brought by the Lord. Then in verse 7 Paul says that the different gifts are given for the benefit of the whole body. Then in verse 11 Paul says that the gifts are given by the Holy Spirit for the purposes of God. In verses 15 – 17 we are told that we should not have an attitude of self depreciation about our gifts – in other words, we should not say that what we can contribute is small and insignificant and in verses 19 – 24 we are instructed to not be self sufficient – that we need others as well. Finally, in the later verses we are told that our diverse gifts are to work together for broader purposes than we can accomplish individually. An example of that can be found in our history and our work to help start Grace Avenue UMC in Frisco. Grace Avenue has touched over a thousand lives and it came from many people working together for common purposes.

Our mission is to make disciples for Jesus Christ and one of the proven ways that is done is in the missional effort of starting a new church. Many might say that we should wait until we are stronger, have less debt, or at a better time. However, the call to make disciples is not a future goal – it is a present reality. We have been asked to work with the North Texas Annual Conference and sponsor a new church. Rev. Edlen Cowley was appointed to our staff for that future purpose.

And working together we want to be found faithful.

Join us next Saturday in our second prayer vigil as we seek to be faithful.

Weaker? Less honorable?

When Paul writes about the indispensability of "members that seem weaker" he is alluding to our body's internal organs: the heart, the liver, and the rest. Though we could never use our heart to lift a table or ward off an attacker, it is necessary to our life. I could live without an arm or a leg, without any limbs at all, but I could not live without a heart.

Paul's reference to the "members we think less honorable" is a veiled reference to the sexual organs, which we, like Adam and Eve, hide from others with our clothing. Yet, as Paul writes, who could deny that we honor our sexuality.

Paul's point becomes clear when we remember that the Mediterranean cultures were built upon the accumulation of honor and the avoidance of shame. Wealth, public patronage, careers, and the rest were all used to a single end, that of accumulating honor, respect, and social status.

Thus, while Paul's words here may be a bit confusing to us, they surely hit the Corinthians hard. Not only does Paul want them to appreciate the contributions and value of those who seem weaker or less honorable or even inferior, he wants those persons, the ones of lowest social status, to be lifted up to the top of the heap. These are words that could have come out of Jesus' mouth; they are consistent with the Sermon of the Mount. Those on the "bottom" sit atop the pyramid in the kingdom of God and in the body of Christ.

No work in the body of Christ is less honorable or less important than any other work. It may seem that way to us, but that is only because we don't see clearly and we haven't learned to embrace Jesus' call to self-giving love. There are ushers and there are pastors. Different work, but one Spirit, one body, one God-given purpose.

² A biblically derived word that comes from Jesus' so-called parable of the talents (see Matthew 25:14-30).

Richard Hays on the Spirit and the Community

In his excellent commentary on 1 Corinthians in the *Interpretation* series, Professor Richard Hays of Duke Seminary, an ordained UMC elder, offers the following reflections on today's passage. A copy of his commentary is in the St. Andrew library.

Spiritual manifestations as gifts. Paul repeatedly emphasizes that the workings of the Holy Spirit in the church are *gifts* distributed by God. There is always a danger that we will fall into the error of regarding these gifts as if they were simple natural capacities or talents, for which we might claim credit or in which we might take pride. Against this tendency, Paul's whole discussion in 1 Corinthians 12 reminds us of the questions posed in 4:7: "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" Every gift of the Spirit is given "for the common good" (12:7) and must be exercised in the church for the sake of ministry to the whole community. As soon as gifts start to be treated as possessions for the private thrills or personal aggrandizement of individuals, they become corrupted and may begin to cause dissension. I have participated in well-meaning church discussion groups that ask each person to answer the question "What are your spiritual gifts?" While such conversations can be helpful in some ways, they run the risk of turning Paul's lists of gifts (vv. 8–10, 28) into a sort of spiritualized Myers-Briggs inventory of personality types. Paul would not want us to spend our time gazing into the mirror and asking what profile of gifts each of us has; he would prefer that we simply be about the business of using our gifts in service to the community.

The church is a charismatic community. Paul pictures the church as a community in which the Holy Spirit operates in powerful and palpable ways through gifts of healing, miracles, and revelatory speech, including tongues and prophecy. Churches in the Pentecostal tradition and communities that have experienced charismatic renewal have recovered such gifts as an integral part of Christian worship and ministry; these manifestations of the Spirit have particularly characterized the rapidly expanding churches of the Third World. In many churches, however—perhaps most churches in the historic Protestant traditions—such phenomena are unknown and may be perceived as threatening. For such churches, 1 Corinthians 12 will indeed look like somebody else's mail. While Paul is aware that the workings of the Holy Spirit are not limited to the more spectacular manifestations that we now characterize as "charismatic," we should not domesticate his conception of the Spirit's power by excluding such gifts from our field of vision—as though he had been talking only about serving on the finance committee or planning the Sunday school curriculum. Teachers working through this text with a class unfamiliar with the manifestations of the Spirit that Paul describes in verses 8–10 might plan to take the group to visit a contemporary community where tongues and prophecy are manifested in the worship service. Such communities should not be hard to find, for in our time the Spirit has chosen to distribute these gifts in churches all around the world. Any community committed to taking Paul's vision for the church as a model for its life will have to ask seriously whether 1 Corinthians 12 does not summon us to open ourselves more radically to the possibility of such manifestations of the Spirit in our midst.

The church is a charismatic community. Paul is also insistent that the gifts of the Spirit must be exercised within the body of Christ for the benefit of the community as a whole. As we have seen, this leads him to highlight the twin themes of *diversity* and *interdependence*: it is good that different individuals have different gifts, and all these different gifts must be orchestrated together for the common good of the community. An important part of the preacher's task will be to discern how these motifs should be balanced to address the needs of the particular local congregation. Some churches, more susceptible to the error of "Lone Ranger" Christianity, may need to hear the appeal for interdependence emphasized, while others, more inclined to press for conformity of Christian experience, may need to hear Paul's affirmation of diverse gifts within the body of Christ. In any case, the image of the body of Christ, as Paul has developed it, provides a vision for authentic community in which there is both great individual freedom (vv. 14–20) and powerful interpersonal sharing and support (vv. 21–26). The goal of our ministry should be nothing less than the formation of such communities.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, APRIL 20 - 26

Monday, 1 Cor. 12:27-13:13 None of the gifts we are given by God for the work of the church are superior to the others. The greatest gifts, the ones for which we should strive, are faith, hope, and love.

Tuesday, 1 Cor. 14:1-25 Using gifts wisely. A case in point.

Wednesday, 1 Cor. 14:26-40 Using our gifts for the good of the community not for ourselves.

Thursday, Philippians 1:3-11 Living in the body of Christ

Friday, Philippians 2:1-18 Because we are united with Christ we are to imitate Christ's humility.

Saturday, Acts 4:32-37 The first community of believers living as a unified family in unlimited service to God and to one another.

Sermon Notes

Get the Monkey Off Your Back: Making Sense of Creation and Evolution

The current *Something Else* series on Sunday mornings

The debate around issues of creation and evolution isn't going away. Instead, it seems to get more and more heated, with a lot more talk than understanding. In this series, we'll try to make sense of the debate and see that Christian truth claims are not at odds with scientific claims.

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning.

Today: Understanding Evolution Next week: Guest speaker on this series

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The church as the "body" of Christ is not Paul's only metaphor of the church. He also uses images of the temple, a household, a field and more. What is distinctive about the metaphor of the body? Why would Paul use it at length? What does it reveal to us about the nature of the body of Christ and our place in it?
2. God has given us all talents and abilities. Some we have discovered over our lifetime, some may be waiting to be discovered. Some we've cultivated, others we've ignored. Paul speaks of gifts given to us by the Spirit, such as he lists in 1 Corinthians 12 and elsewhere. Do you think that these gifts differ from other talents we discover in ourselves? If so, how do such "spiritual gifts" differ from what we think of as talents? If not, what does Paul want us to understand about the gifts? You probably ought to look over some of Paul's other passages on the gifts, such as Romans 12:3-8 and Ephesians 4:11-13. For what purpose has God given us any gifts at all?
3. Paul begins Corinthians 12 with his affirmation that it is the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit alone, who enables anyone to affirm that "Jesus is Lord." Paul goes on to say that it is by the Spirit that we are all baptized into one body and that it is the Spirit who gives us the many gifts for the common good. The Spirit is God-present with us. As we move forward on accomplishing what we believe to be God's vision for St. Andrew, what do you think are the Spirit's, i.e., God's, hopes for us? What are God's expectations of us? How we help to ensure that our diversity does not pull us away from our unity of purpose and of commitment?