

Christian Unity
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1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

¹² 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. 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.

¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot were to 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 were to 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.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But strive for the greater gifts.

Luke 4:14-21

14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

During my time off after Christmas, I, like many, many others, saw *Les Misérables* at the movies. I had seen it on stage years before and enjoyed it but, with this viewing, the story really stuck with me. And not only did the story stick, but so did the songs. As I was thinking about our readings for this morning, an anthem kept running through my head. “Do you hear the people sing? / Singing the song of angry men? / It is the music of a people / Who will not be slaves again!” At first hearing, you may wonder how exactly it has to do with our readings – I know I did.

For those unfamiliar, *Les Mis*, as it is affectionately known, as both musical and movie, is based upon Victor Hugo’s historical novel which culminates in the peoples’ rebellion of 1832 against the ruling powers of France. The divide between the rich and the poor was insurmountable and the plight of the poor was being ignored. The insurgents were calling for a unity among the poor against the powers that be. Among the insurgents were not only poor but also privileged who recognized the injustices. “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” Aha. I see now where the melody was carried on the wind of the Spirit. The Spirit, who is the thread through our readings, is the same Spirit in the thread of our hearing and understanding of the readings.

“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.” “Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee...” “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...” From last week’s reading from 1 Corinthians: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit...To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good...All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.” Our Christian unity is because of Christ and through the Spirit.

Two weeks ago, I mentioned the events for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and, in broad terms, how we still have a need to work toward this. More important, though, than any need is the reason. We might point to Jesus’ words in Matthew 22 as our call as Christians: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”¹ Consider, though, the call of Jesus whom we follow. If you will, take a pew Bible from in front of you, or your own if you brought it along. Find Isaiah. Flip through. Sixty-six chapters is a lot. Imagine a scroll of the same readings being unrolled on a small, flat surface. Imagine what it may have looked like waiting for Jesus to find the area we consider chapter 61 – a lot of unrolling and rerolling until he found the place he was looking for, as Luke puts it.

Then he reads: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then he rolled the scroll back up.

¹ Matthew 22:37-39

All the unrolling and rerolling had to be reversed to get the scroll back to the beginning. So the people gathered waited and waited while he finished. And then he sits down. Temple worship then, just like ours now, included not only readings but also an explication of those readings after they were read. So the people stared at him. Just sitting down, and after reading two sentences? They, like the disciples so often, didn't get it right away so Jesus adds "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Which gets me back to Jesus' call. Scholar Linda McKinnish Bridges sums it up this way: "In reading this portion of the Hebrew Scripture, Jesus is saying that his life work will be to (1) heal the brokenhearted; (2) announce the release of prisoners of war; (3) recover sight to the blind; (4) announce the acceptable year of the Lord."² God has anointed Jesus for these purposes: to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. If this passage from Isaiah defines Jesus' call, then it should define ours also.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians guides us to this as well in his own way. The people of Corinth were bickering over who was the better Christian, whose gifts of the Spirit mattered more, who was more important. If Paul could have been with them in the same room, he might have stomped his feet and yelled, "That's not what it's about!" Distance separated them so he had to say it in a letter. When we ordained and installed our elders and deacons two weeks ago, we celebrated the diversity of their gifts among us, for even among the ministry of deacons, the ministry of sympathy and serving, the ministry which includes healing the brokenhearted, different gifts are needed. Among the ministry of ruling elders, the ministry of governing, we need different gifts for, if all had the same gifts, how would we fulfill the work of the elders for finance, congregational life, mission, worship, property, and membership?

We know in our heads that diversity is good and necessary but we, like the followers in Corinth, sometimes begin thinking one job is more important than another. Maybe you think "we want members so we can grow"? Maybe you think "people will come if our church building is in good condition"? Maybe you think "the right event will bring people to our church and they'll decide to join us"? You see where I am going – it's easy to think that diversity is great but some gifts are just more important. And maybe we do that with ourselves, too. "So-and-so is always doing this for the church; she is a better Christian than I, he matters more to the health and well-being of the church than I." If the apostle Paul knew you were thinking this, he would be stomping his feet again.

Raewynne J. Whiteley connects Paul's message about belonging to the body to baptism, writing, "We come to the water of baptism as individuals, independent and relatively self-contained. We come

² *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p. 287.

out of the water changed. Our identity is no longer solitary; we can no longer truly be known without reference to that community into which we have been incorporated: the body of Christ, the church... We are given the gift of belonging at baptism, but we are also signing up for the responsibility of functioning as part of the body of Christ.”³ You can say that you are not important but God would say otherwise. God called you because you matter, whether you think your gifts are redundant or small or even too unusual. God called you to be part of the unity of the church.

In thinking about unity, we lament at the fractured church. We lament what is called “denominationalism,” the tendency for people to associate with a specific denomination or even an offshoot of a denomination. We see the other’s choice to separate as a breaking of the unity of the church. And when it is done in hateful ways, with anger and superiority, the unity of the church is indeed broken. But what if we recognized that we are each, in our ways, working to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor? We may think other churches, other denominations, redundant or small or too unusual. But God has called them, too.

Together, we recognize a need for unity against the powers that be. We are the poor and the privileged who recognize the injustices, the same injustices of which Isaiah spoke, the same ones for which Jesus was anointed. People are captive to ways of hurt, to ways of shame, to ways of the world. People are blindly following the life the world offers, instead of seeing the life Christ offers. People are oppressed by others and by their own decisions. People believe God could not look with love upon them. A call is upon us all, united in Christ’s call. Do you hear the people sing? It is the music of a people who will not be slaves again. No longer slaves to the world but servants of Christ, together, no matter if redundant, small, or unusual.

Let us pray: Call us, O God, to serve you together in all our diversity. Amen.

³ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p. 279-281.