

Number Forty-Seven!

I Corinthians 12: 12-31a

Stop me if you've heard this one: it seems a young newspaper reporter was sent out on assignment to cover a convention of joke-tellers. She arrived at the site, not entirely sure what to expect, but what she did not expect, when she walked into the conference room, was a bunch of people shouting out seemingly random numbers. "316!" somebody would shout, and everyone in the room would laugh or groan.

"127!" shouted someone else, with similar response. The young reporter was puzzled—had she stumbled into the mathematicians' convention?

Seeing her confusion, a helpful conventioneer explained: "We've been coming to these things so long that everybody knows all the jokes. So, to save time, we've numbered them all, and we just call out a number."

About that time, a voice called out, "Number 88!" And again, there were polite chuckles, a few giggles, a smile—but one of the attendees absolutely **convulsed in laughter**, gasping for breath, pounding the table, rolling in the floor, rubbing tears from his eyes—the display of uncontrolled hysterics went on for quite some time. "What's up with him?" the reporter inquired. "I don't know," responded her companion. "I guess he'd never heard that one before."

Now the funny thing about this story—if in fact there is anything funny about the story—is the notion that a joke can be reduced to its most basic essence—in fact reduced BEYOND its essence to the point that the build-up doesn't matter, the punch line really doesn't matter, and all that is left is a label that elicits a familiar and predictable response. It's a silly notion. "Eighty-eight" is a joke from which every trace of joke-ness has been removed.

But then again....in a way, those of us who are longtime church attenders have a similar shorthand with many scripture passages. We know passages by name and we know their lessons by heart without hearing them: "David and Goliath!" for example, means plucky underdogs can overcome giant obstacles; "The Good Samaritan!" means always show kindness to people in need; and "The Body of Christ!" means we all have a role, large or small, in the body that is the church.

And therein lies the problem. Because David and Goliath is really NOT merely a story about plucky underdogs overcoming huge obstacles, it is actually a story about the power of God bringing strength to the powerless (Do you see how the plucky underdog bit leaves God out of the picture?). David and Goliath is a fundamental questioning of the assumption that might makes right and an assertion that, in fact, FAITH makes right. In the same way that reductionist joke telling loses the punch line, reductionist scripture reading loses the POINT.

To continue, think of the Good Samaritan—to reduce that passage to the lesson “Show kindness to a neighbor in need” or “Be excellent to each other” or “be helpful” smooths away all the rough edges of the parable. The parable extends neighbor love to its most radical conclusion—who is my neighbor? Even my sworn, hated enemy. The Good Samaritan does not teach us to be nice but to extend love without limits.

Well, you get the idea—in the same way that the joke tellers kept the labels but lost the joke, we often keep some surface level aspect of the scripture passage but lose all the teeth.

And that, I believe, is what we’ve done with Paul’s writing from I Corinthians about the body of Christ. We have reduced it, oftentimes, to a shallow stewardship sermon about talents that says something like, “We all have a role to play in the body. Find your unique gift and share it.” And that’s not a bad message as far as it goes, because the church does in fact need many people and different gifts. But Paul is talking of something more than that, and more CHALLENGING than that. He is talking about RADICAL INTERDEPENDENCE AMONG THE BODY’S MEMBERS. About the way we NEED people who are very different from us. About the way that we in the church must strive to honor each and every member—no matter how different, how difficult, how seemingly insignificant.

“Everybody do your bit” is a shallow message for a comfortable church. “You are a body, act like it,” is a challenging message to an uncomfortable church.

And the church in Corinth to which Paul writes these words is a decidedly uncomfortable church. Paul writes these words to urge togetherness in a church that seemingly is under constant threat of pulling apart.

It may be helpful for us to understand a bit about the church and the setting of Corinth. In Paul's day, Corinth was a strategic and bustling commercial center. The city was situated on the Isthmus of Corinth, a strip of land just a few miles wide. By portaging, or carting goods a short distance across the isthmus, traders operating between Rome and the cities of the Eastern Mediterranean could avoid a long and stormy journey out into the open Mediterranean Sea. Parenthetically, I have experienced the fierce Mediterranean storms on a 437-foot Navy destroyer—perhaps others among you have as well. They would have been catastrophic to a small wooden sailing vessel. The Corinthian shipping route was a wise choice to protect both lives and cargo, so the entire Mediterranean shipping trade flowed substantially through Corinth.

That means Corinth became a huge melting pot of people from the known world—sailors and traders from every corner of the Mediterranean brought their various cultures and languages and religious traditions: it featured Jewish synagogues, Greek and Egyptian religious shrines, the emperor worship of the Roman Imperial cult.

And a port full of sailors is a port full of bars and brothels as well. Corinth was renowned for its seamy underculture.

Most of all perhaps, Corinth was a place of social stratification—the wealthiest of the wealthy traders could be found there, and the poorest of the poor: slaves and indentured servants, folks who had come to Corinth seeking their fortune and couldn't afford to leave. In sum, Corinth was a place of extreme diversity in thought, economic condition, religion, and ethnicity. It carried a reputation a reputation for wealth without culture and for abuse of the poor by the wealthy.

The continuing struggle in the Corinthian Church, therefore, was that the congregation reflected the socioeconomic and religious makeup of the city. A careful reading of Paul's letters to the Corinthians reveals problems like the privileged members showing up early for dinners and consuming all the best food and drink before the working-class folk could arrive. Also, there was debate over whether one could eat meat from an animal that had been offered as a sacrifice to a pagan idol, with the remnants being sold in the public market. Theological liberals said, "It's okay." Theological conservatives said, "It's unholy and impure."

So the constant pull in the Corinthian church was for oil and water to separate—the rich with the rich and the poor with the poor. The liberals with the liberals and the conservatives with the conservatives. And Paul writes to say, “Your baptism is bigger than that—separatism is sin. You must find a way to find unity of function amid your diversity of form, in the same way that the parts of a body work together.

The body cannot discard or discount or diminish or devalue difference because when you start shedding body parts, or valuing the function of some parts above the others, pretty soon you no longer have a body—and the very beauty of the body is its complexity and diversity, not its purity or uniformity.”

Now why do I think that Paul’s message to the church at Corinth is a vital message to the Church in our setting and in our day? Well, I might suggest that Corinth is a microcosm, or a representation in miniature, of the cultural setting in which the Church—the Presbyterian Church, our church operates. The religious diversity of Corinth—we have it. Maybe not as radically or visibly, but even our small church, not to mention our denomination as a whole, comprises people who were raised as theists and non-theists, as Catholics, as cradle Presbyterians, as Methodists or Baptists or Quakers, or as a casserole of all of those things.

The racial diversity of Corinth—we have it—or at least, our culture has it and we ought to have it. Yet we haven’t solved that issue any more than they have—look at our cultural struggles over confederate civil war statues, or football players kneeling during the national anthem, look at the debate/pitched battle over immigration issues...we have not evolved as far as we like to think on issues of race and culture. If anything, we seem to be devolving in the present climate.

The economic diversity and the economic INJUSTICE of Corinth—we have it. Read an article on wealth and class from the publication of your choosing and it will reveal the growing divide in our nation between rich and poor, upper class and underclass, haves and have nots...which contributes, by the way to the racial and cultural divisions I mentioned earlier.

The liberal/conservative theological division that I mentioned in Corinth—we have that as well. The tense debate between purity and permissiveness, between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law, has created division in our denomination—and in the Lutheran, the Episcopalian, the Methodist, the Baptist, and about every other denomination you can think of.

There is another joke that's not really a joke, about a man who was rescued after years living alone on a deserted island. When his rescuers arrived they found three huts—one man, but three huts--and so they asked him: why did you build three huts? He replied, "Well this one is where I live, and that one over there is where I go to church." "But what of the third hut?" his rescuers asked. "Oh, that. That's where I used to go to church," the man replied. Is that the direction we are headed? Toward living alone and apart, each of us able to point out where we used to go to church?

Perhaps it is, unless we can hear and heed Paul's plea for radical interdependence upon each other. But our common reading of this text about the body of Christ won't get us there: "We all have a unique role so each of us must do our bit"—that reading causes us to reflect upon what unique or special role we can play within the body. And focusing upon what is unique or special about OUR role can have harmful side effects. It can cause us to think that, although there are different talents and roles and functions within the body the one that is MOST important for me to focus upon—is mine.

The eyes begin to say, "Oh if only the other parts of the body could see things as clearly and precisely as we do. Surely our role is of primary importance." The ears begin to say, "Oh, if only the other parts of the body could hear with the acuity that we do." And we begin to separate.

Or if we don't separate according to importance, we divide according to interest. The eyes take interest only in eye things; the ears do only ear things. In practical terms, that's the equivalent of saying, oh, I sing in the choir, I have no interest in Sunday school; or I teach Sunday school, I have no interest in mission; or I do mission projects, I have no interest in fellowship events.

Radical interdependence involves TWO distinct things—one is offering the gifts that you have to offer...and the other is receiving or appreciating the gifts that the other parts of the body offer. The eyes don't just see, they also receive and appreciate, value and depend upon the gifts that the ears bring to the body. I sometimes think we have learned too well the adage that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

We focus too much upon how we can give our gifts or pursue our interests, and too little upon how we can receive the gifts of others or value their contributions. Well, to cut to the chase, we cannot reduce Paul's message to everybody do your bit or fulfill your role.

Paul's message is, "We NEED each other." In all of our theological difference, in all of our cultural diversity, in all of our economic stratification, in all of our conflicting convictions—we depend upon each other.

My well-being is bound up in your well-being, the security of the poor is bound up in the privilege of the wealthy, while the humanity of the wealthy is bound up in the humility of the poor; the broad mindedness of the theological liberal needs the clarity and precision of the theological conservative, while the conservative who sees only the clear black and white of scripture may need the liberal to see nuances or shades of meaning.

We are bound up in each other, Paul challenges, and as hard as that is, look at the wondrous result of it, the human body—the body politic—the body of Christ is a miraculous interworking of unity amid diversity and of radical interdependence.

If we do not hear that message...then we will be a pile of eyes over here offering their gifts of sight to no one, a heap of ears over there, hearing everything but accomplishing nothing, teeth to chew without a throat to swallow, or the brain's pure and rational logic, desperately needing the feet to dance.

A bunch of disembodied parts longing to be whole, when we are called to be a whole that vastly exceeds the sum of its parts. Strive for the greater gifts—and I will show you a still more excellent way. And that—is sermon number forty-seven. Amen.