

Bringing Our Gifts
Menno Mennonite Church
January 26, 2025

Purpose: to celebrate the gifting of the width and breadth of the body of Christ.

Message: We are invited to bring our gifts to the body provided that we know and celebrate them and their use in the Kingdom of God.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 (I will read); Psalm 133 (please read)

Synopsis: There is a temptation within the body to even all things into the other. Faith, that intensely personal identity of who we are in Christ is closely held as a personal affair. This goes for individuals. This goes for groups. We can be inclined to wonder whether there are significant ways where our part of the body is significant enough to be marked, known for its gifts, marked for their distinctiveness. In other words, does it matter that we are who we say we are? As we celebrate the working of our gift within the body, we are invited to offer our gifts for the wholeness of the body present to us now.

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

12 Christ is just like the human body—
a body is a unit and has many parts;
and all the parts of the body are one body,
even though there are many.

13 We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body,
whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free,
and we all were given one Spirit to drink.

14 Certainly the body isn't one part but many.

15 If the foot says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not a hand,"
does that mean it's not part of the body?

16 If the ear says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not an eye,"
does that mean it's not part of the body?

17 If the whole body were an eye, what would happen to the hearing?
And if the whole body were an ear, what would happen to the sense of smell?

18 But as it is,

God has placed each one of the parts in the body just like he wanted.

19 If all were one and the same body part, what would happen to the body?

20 But as it is, there are many parts but one body.

21 So the eye can't say to the hand, "I don't need you,"
or in turn, the head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you."

22 Instead, the parts of the body that people think
are the weakest are the most necessary.

23 The parts of the body that we think are less honorable
are the ones we honor the most.

The private parts of our body that aren't presentable
are the ones that are given the most dignity.

24 The parts of our body that are presentable don't need this.

But God has put the body together,
giving greater honor to the part with less honor

25 so that there won't be division in the body
and so the parts might have mutual concern for each other.

26 If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it;
if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it.

27 You are the body of Christ and parts of each other.

28 In the church,
God has appointed first apostles,
second prophets,
third teachers,
then miracles,
then gifts of healing,
the ability to help others,
leadership skills,
different kinds of tongues.

29 All aren't apostles, are they?

All aren't prophets, are they?

All aren't teachers, are they?

All don't perform miracles, do they?

30 All don't have gifts of healing, do they?

All don't speak in different tongues, do they?

All don't interpret, do they?

31 Use your ambition to try to get the greater gifts.

And I'm going to show you an even better way.

We all know this metaphor of Paul's quite well. The body of Christ and its many members. We know it because it is familiar and well worn, one that the church knows well. We know it well because it is where we look for our organizing metaphor for what it is we do together and who it is we are. Well known may or may not be the same thing as more popular. In the world of churchy sayings, I am guessing this one might be well down the list of artistically printed plaques for the way to display. We are far more given to the first-person declarations of faith: as for me and my house, we will follow the Lord. The ones where we can see and know ourselves within the framework of God's blessings and identity are way more popular. The body is something that is way more complicated than just our knowing and having faith in the proper Jesus. We might even shy away from this one for want of knowing what to do, what to say about it all.

This really shouldn't surprise us. Our concepts of body are fraught things. As fearfully and wondrously made as we each are, that doesn't mean that we always feel that way. Were we to take the time to step aside and share in small groups what it is that we think we look like, I am guessing that we would come up with all sorts of adjectives to describe the elements of our personal bodies that might wish we could change or do without. The pounce around the middle, the graying hair that speaks both of wisdom and of years passed, the things that we just wish were different at the end of the day. Like the sandpaper reality that come when we actually hear ourselves on a recording and declare "OH That's what I sound like?" we know that we can easily struggle squaring who it is that we are, who we think we are and who we think we are supposed to be, whether that standard is our own or the ones given us by whomever shapes our self-image. We each have our images of what our physical bodies SHOULD be, and that in turn can impact how we then think about our sense of self. It is sticky, sensitive, hard territory into which to venture, and offers challenges to how to best think about the ways of the world.

I think we have a similar discomfort when we apply the concept to the church metaphor too. We well know that the work of the church is a work of coming together to make something bigger than ourselves; to make ourselves into the body that Paul writes about here. Christ's body is no invisible, spiritual concept which we can hand wave away. It consists of relationships and connections between each other, all of whom are interdependent with each other, together ultimately being dependent on the Holy Spirit and, most importantly, Jesus Christ at the head. As such we know that this is work. Sometimes hard work. It is good work—don't get me wrong.

As with so many things that are worth doing, building Christ's body together is meant to be hard. There are meant to be arguments. There are meant to be compromises. There are times when we are together, and times when we are apart, and there is a genuine task in bridging the gap between different points of view. What's more, where we have had many generations within the church, we might be carrying a memory of how things used to be. Perhaps then when others were carrying the heaviest responsibility of doing this work, the world and the way that things worked seemed more easily managed when the task wasn't ours to do.

All of this and so much more can develop in us a sense of negative body image when it comes to the church as well. Whether it is the level of the congregation, conference, or denomination we can find ourselves wondering what it is all for and how it might be part of the greater whole. We might find ourselves anxious, ashamed, or self-conscious about the behavior, opinions, or ideas of other part of the body. It can be a push to keep bringing together what Jesus brings together. We might wonder why we ought to stay in fellowship let alone in the body with people with whom we passionately disagree. We might be given to think that there is something like the perfect body and if we would simply find the right exercise to achieve it our grouping, however we might define it, would be, finally, the body of perfection we long for. We might have the temptation to exempt ourselves from the Body (We do it better, or we need not be part of the body) or cut each other off, having no part of the offending member (something which Anabaptists have been especially prone to do over the years).

None of this yields the right realistic self-image. That the work we have to do when we work with a distorted body image. There is a process that names and addresses the unrealistic expectations that exists and replace them with more realistic ones, leading, eventually, to a self-acceptance and appreciation that acknowledges the self for what it is. This also applies to the body of Christ. Commentator Dan Nighswander writes in his Believers church commentary on 1 Corinthians: "These are also appropriate goals for Christians in relation to the church. Honest Self-perception neither covers up nor overemphasizes the reality of disagreements, embarrassment with the other, and public shame. Realistic expectations depend on realizing that the church belongs to God, not to its members or just the people who agree with and act like us. Self-acceptance includes accepting the "less honorable" members (12:21–25) while also

claiming our own place in the church (12:15–20). This applies to individuals, to congregations, and to denominations.”¹

As we celebrate Anabaptism at 500 first this week and really this whole year, we do well to consider our sense of the body as we do so. There may be a bit of a peculiarity in the celebration, wondering either what we are celebrating 500 years later (it is a big to do about a handful of baptisms). We may be wondering why we ought to take note of such things at all and allow merely Christian to suffice for the way we are in the world. We might be given to thinking that it is precisely our denominations that are the beginning of all the trouble in the world and how it works at least where the church is involved. I have even heard it asked whether the wide variety and flavors of Christian thought and practice isn't one more sign of its flaws. Since there are so many ways of being a follower of Christ, its argued, then perhaps that it just not the best idea in the first place. One more indication that the real way of being a follower of Christ is to be a free agent.

Yet the Bible does not have an expressed concept of such a thing existing. Yes, you have individuals invited to follow and come alongside. But that always points toward the working of a larger whole whether that is a group of 12 disciples or the whole of the church. Accordingly, I think our concept of denomination and traditional identity needs a similar re-framing. Instead of our working out increasingly particular ways we want to follow Christ together in an effort of finding the perfect form and physique of the church to be once and for all, might we better off focusing on what we really are: members of the body, formed and shaped, each with our own gifts that can be shared with the whole. We are who we are and celebrate our tradition not because of its polish or its perfection. Instead we celebrate that a long time ago, there were people so committed to a way of following Christ that it called them to depart from the world around them and be different, yielding a new expression of Christ's body to celebrate in our midst. That tradition that puts Jesus at the center of its faith, community at the center of its life and reconciliation at the center of its work persisted through the years, grew and changed, migrated and suffered, argued and worked. Split and came together. And became us; a body that is part of the larger, central body of Christ meant so the gifts of the Spirit might be known and celebrated. We can no more separate ourselves from the body of Christ than we can separate ourselves from ourselves in our body, whether we are excited by that body all the time or not.

¹ BCBC 1 Corinthians as published in electronic *Logos Version*

We celebrate the working of God in our Anabaptist Body, in our MCUSA Body, our PNMC Body, our Menno body because we have been gifted with all that we might need that God's Spirit might be known in our world. Of course we think our ways are the right ways. Of course there would be extents to which we might want to separate ourselves from those who are not of our traditions, don't quite speak our language or traditions, or might see the body differently than we do.

As Paul writes: The hand cannot say "I have no need of you" because it being an eye. We cannot say to each other that we are not one because we suspect we might think differently about the issues of the day. The East side cannot say to the West "we have no need of you" because they spend too much time protesting, nor they to us because we don't sing the right style of music. The proud Anabaptist cannot say to the Lutheran "we are not of the same Body" because of the texts we read or the hymns we sing or to the Catholic because we do not understand their mysticism. The list can go on and on.

We are the body simply and singularly because that is what God wish us to be. It is how God made us to be. It is the miracle of faith that all that is us is part of the Body because Christ makes us one. In that we can move, celebrate, grow, and be ever transformed into the image whose body we are and whose will we carry into a wanting world. That is worth celebrating. That is worth being. That is worth continuing to the glory of God, now and forever. Amen.