

**The Third Church Pulpit**  
Sermons from Third Presbyterian Church  
Rochester, New York

# Unity, Diversity and the Body

John Wilkinson

January 27, 2019



John Wilkinson

**“Unity, Diversity and the Body”**

January 27, 2019

Third Sunday after Epiphany

I Corinthians 12:1-31

Friday night and Saturday, the three boards of Third Church – the Session, Board of Deacons and Board of Trustees – spent time in retreat, taking a step back to discern collectively and creatively about what’s new and what’s next at Third Church. We focused on that word, “new,” reflecting on God’s promise to do a new thing, God’s promise to make all things new.

Those biblical affirmations go to a much deeper place than even a church’s vision: the renewal of lives, the renewal of creation. Yet they also remind us what we know – that any institution, any organization, whether it be a family or a not-for-profit or a business or a church – must evolve and adapt and change if it is to survive, let alone thrive. That’s the Rochester business story, as far as I understand it. And it’s true for the church.

I help to found an unofficial Presbyterian organization called “Next Church,” with a simple premise – that if there is to be a “next” church, we must presume that it cannot be like the “this” church, let alone the “last/past” church that once was.

History and legacy are important as providers of inspiration and direction, but they hinder us when they turn into nostalgia and sentimentality. Martin Marty once quipped that the seven deadly words of the church are “we’ve always done it that way before.” He’s right. God is about doing a new thing, in our lives and in the life of the world, to be sure. And certainly the life of the church. How do we perceive it?

I’ve been thinking about this as well – as we think about stewardship, and nominations, as we prepare to welcome the presbytery to our house once again. How similar to other entities the church can look on the surface – a board of a non-for-profit, a PTA or alumni council or the like. Many of you serve on such boards. I do as well, and they matter to the quality of life in our community. We Presbyterians believe in very permeable lines when it comes to the community’s life, believe that God works in all places, in all ways, for good. Yet a church is different. It has a different starting place and a different ending place.

Last Sunday, in the midst of Snowpocalypse/Snowmageddon 2019, we read the first portion

of chapter 12 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. I thought it worth reading again today, along with the second part of the chapter. In fact, it's worth finding and tracking as we work through it, not quite but almost old school Bible study style.

Paul is writing to a brand-new church that is trying to figure itself out – how to live together coming from different backgrounds, different religious traditions, lots and lots of difference. This church needs encouragement. Paul gives them something far more valuable than by-laws or a constitution or a strategic plan. He tells them that there is a variety of gifts and there are a variety of ways to serve. See that in verses 4 and 5. And varieties of activities, in verse 6.

But don't let the variety be the ultimate point. Let the unity be the point. And the unity is not our doing, but God's. It is the same God who activates these gifts. Each of them, each of us, given the manifestation of the Spirit – for the common good. In verse 8 and following, Paul outlines what those gifts are. Wisdom and knowledge – what we might call teaching and learning. Faith. Healing. Things like miracles and interpretation that we might not fully understand now, or practice. But we get the point.

In verse 11 Paul insists – so we must insist – that the same Spirit gives us all these gifts. For us that will look differently – gifts of serving or caring or teaching or leading or advocating or organizing. The point is that we all have gifts and we each have gifts – not of our making but of the Spirit's. And we are called to share them, for the common good.

Paul continues, with language that underscores how a church is different than any other “thing,” how service here is different. The diversity of gifts we receive is like a body, with different parts. But they all function together, in unity, to make the body complete. And this unity is achieved not because of our own capacities or credentials. It is achieved through baptism. It begins with baptism and flows from there.

Look at verses 12 and 13 again: “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. 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.”

Paul follows with a long exposition of how the body works. It is elegant and profound. I've used it in teaching as we think about the various roles of the Session or Deacons or Trustees, or various groups like the choir or ushers or Sunday school teachers or DRM volunteers. All are needed to make this body what it is.

I've used this language in our denomination's ordination debates – how the right needs the

left and the left needs the right. That message was often lost as we plowed through debate after debate and vote after vote. Yet how profound it is, after Paul gives us a little anatomy lesson, to hear in verses 24 and 25: “God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.”

Paul, the great rhetorician, loops back to where he started – unity and diversity, and a variety of gifts with a singleness of mission. In verse 27 he shares what might be the most compact church mission statement there is, a very easily remembered elevator speech: “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

Then, if we missed it, another list of callings. We can’t be all these things, just like we can’t all be legs or arms or eyes in the body. But when we pursue at our roles, and nurture our gifts, and offer them to God, the body functions well and the church’s mission is advanced. Paul calls it a “still more excellent way.”

What does that look like? In just a few minutes we will share a portion of the Presbyterian Church’s Brief Statement of Faith, so as long as we are working through the biblical text this morning, let’s do the same with the Brief Statement. Written in the 1980’s, when the Southern and Northern factions of the Presbyterian Church were coming together after 120 years – shame on us for dividing over slavery and shame on us for taking so long to get back together – the Brief Statement sought to create common language for this new church.

The Holy Spirit section echoes Paul’s Corinthians language – we are bound together “with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church.” The church is all of those other things – an organization, an institution, with all the things. But it is first and last and always this – the body of Christ, formed by baptism. That identity forms its mission.

The Brief Statement then reminds us of what we are called to do. Look at those wonderful verbs, says the English teacher’s son, the Spirit’s activity and ours. Inspires. Rules. Engages. Claims. Feeds. And calls. Calls. That was controversial then, in the 1980’s. Not all of our denominational partners believe that, even now. “Calls women and men to all ministries of the church.” But it’s how we understand the Spirit to work, and it was important to say. Thankfully in the 21st century that affirmation has expanded even more so.

What are we to do? Again, more fabulous verbs. Pray. Witness. Unmask. Hear. Work. My favorite line of the Brief Statement – “in a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing.” That’s not a bad elevator speech either, or a very profound vision statement.

As we live into the next church, as we – together – seek to perceive the new thing that God is doing, let's also cling fast to some bedrock principles. We are all part of the body and we are all given gifts to share. And all those gifts are needed. Without question and without exception.

The results will never be perfect – we are human after all. But in thinking about Martin Luther King, Jr. last week, I ran across this little notion. “Don't be afraid to defend the Church where necessary,” King said. “Certainly the Church is not perfect. It has often stood in the way of social and scientific progress...but in spite of its errors I would hate to see what the world would be like without it.” I agree. Amen.

**Third Presbyterian Church**  
4 Meigs Street  
Rochester, NY 14607-2013  
[www.thirdpresbyterian.org](http://www.thirdpresbyterian.org)

