

Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10  
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a  
Luke 4:14-21

## **1 Corinthians 12:12-31**

<sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup>If 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. <sup>16</sup>And 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. <sup>17</sup>If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup>But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup>If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup>As it is, there are many members, yet one body. <sup>21</sup>The 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.” <sup>22</sup>On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup>and 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; <sup>24</sup>whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, <sup>25</sup>that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. <sup>26</sup>If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

<sup>27</sup>Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. <sup>28</sup>And 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. <sup>29</sup>Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? <sup>30</sup>Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? <sup>31</sup>But strive for the greater gifts.

It tells us a lot about ourselves – what we consider to be virtues. When we think the best about ourselves, what are we thinking?

This is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It starts every year on January 18, the Commemoration of the Confession of St. Peter and it ends every year on January 25, the Commemoration of the Conversion of St. Paul. Churches of all denominations get flyers in the mail and prayers are written and reminders are distributed. It is time to pray throughout Christendom for Christian unity.

When we confess the Nicene Creed we say that we believe in **one** holy catholic and apostolic Church – and, even as we say that, it is obvious that in many ways the church is divided. There are lots of different denominations. Within the denominations, themselves, there are some impressive arguments among the members that do not do much to promote unity. I have even heard of disagreements within congregations among people who know each other and worship together.

Church divisions have been recorded from the epoch-changing split of the Eastern and Western Churches in 1054 to the less-well remembered time when a woman I knew stormed out of her church because the coffee cups had been put in the wrong cupboard of the church kitchen. She said she wouldn't come back but she did. There wasn't much agreement about that either.

From the earliest days of Christianity, Christians have lived and worshiped, not only in isolation from one another, but in serious disagreement with each other. People who insist on the name *Christian* sometimes find they cannot gather around the same altar and take the sacrament together. They cannot hear the proclamation of the word together. So we declare our believe in one church, and then set aside one week a year to pray that it were true.

As we pray to God to accomplish unity, let us beware of our virtues. Let us be careful of what we put in God's service to make us all one body of Christ. I am warning you of the dangerous virtues called "tolerance" and "acceptance". (You would not have thought you would hear a sermon against tolerance and acceptance, especially during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity – but here it is.) The danger of celebrating our "acceptance" of others and congratulating ourselves for "tolerance" is that we think it is enough. We will put up with what we disagree with. We will strengthen the church, the Body of Christ, with that famous old phrase, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere."

Thus we have stopped all arguments. We have stopped them by saying the subject matter is not worth arguing about.

St. Paul has a different idea about unity. In this morning's second lesson he wrote, "Just as a human body, though it is made up of many parts, is a single unit because all these parts, though many, make one body, so it is with Christ..." Paul compares the church with the human body. (He is continuing a thought he began in our reading last week.) Tolerance and acceptance is no way to maintain a healthy body. Picture the look on your doctor's face when you tell her, "I'll tolerate any health that comes my way. It doesn't matter what kind of health I have as long as it's mine, I'll accept it."

One church, one body, is not a matter of tolerance and acceptance. It is a matter of respect, love, help, and work.

The problem with trusting "acceptance" and "tolerance" as the way to church unity is that they depend upon us. It is a notion of the Body of Christ in which we make ourselves and our choices the strength of the church. God's gift is the strength of the church, not our choices. God has become one of us as Jesus. He lives with us today to bring us life and give us direction and hope. God lives with us as the Body of Christ.

We will not get far in our hope for one church as long as we pin our unity to our toleration of each other. Acceptance and tolerance are virtues, but they will not heal the divisions of the church. The Gospel, the gift of God, will bring us together as the body of Christ.

Let's live the way we believe. We say we believe in one church; let's live that way. Let's make the focus of our lives what God has done for us. Do not make the focus our divisions, the things we can think up to disagree about. People do that, you know. People often make their differences the definition of their lives.

Ask a well-read, hard-studying Christian what he believes and sometimes he will list all the denominations he disagrees with, and name the heretics in his own denomination. In some cases, the longer a person has thought about religion the longer the list of people he considers to be heretical. (Last week I got a newsletter from a group of people who are organized around how angry they are. They've changed what they're angry about two or three times during the ten years of their existence, but the main thing seems to be that they are angry. They put a cross right there by their return address.)

Do not make the focus of our life the divisions that we have in our understanding of God. Make the focus of our lives what God has done for us. Focus on the gospel. That is our identity. That is what makes us who we are – God's gift to us. That is what makes us one body.

Jesus did not come into our lives because we had already achieved unity. He came into our lives and that is what unites us. That is what makes us one. That is reflected in the sacraments. We do not reserve sharing the Sacrament of Communion as a sign that we have achieved unity. God gives us the Sacrament of Communion to make us one body. Baptism is not a goal. It is not a prize to show that we have joined the body. It is a gift that unites us to the body.

When Paul compares the church to a body, he does more than give us a good reason to tolerate each other. He gives us a reason to celebrate. Paul writes, “If your whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?” Unity is more than an obligation; it is a great gift. Because unity is not uniformity. Yes, there are differences between people. That is not an obstacle to overcome; that is a joy that is to be celebrated. Diversity enriches us; it does not divide us.

In this Week of Prayers for Christian Unity, please remember to pray that we will be one. Do not pray that we will all be the same. In the world-wide church, we need exuberant worship, *and* quiet meditation. We need deep thought *and* energetic service. We need the imagination to begin things never tried *and* the love of history to preserve our traditions.

In our own congregation we have so many wonderful people. But our congregation would be poorer if any one of you were a blueprint for all the others.

Every person you see, every day, is just like you. Not the same ideas or values. Different goals, different experiences, **but loved by God** – a person for whom Christ has come, and died, and defeated death.

That is what makes people who they are. That is who you are. More important than anything else, you are a person loved by God. And everyone else drawing breath this morning answers that same description.

This morning, Paul has proclaimed to you that you are one. “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body ... and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”