

1 Corinthians 12:12–26 (NRSV)

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.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 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. 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. 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? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 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; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But 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. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Measuring Contributions

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: February 24, 2016 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12–26

The Roman historian Livy recounts a time in the city when there was great discord, and people generally were generally unappreciative of each other, and it was causing unrest in Rome. The senate was very concerned about the situation, and the senators sent Menenius Agrippa, an eloquent man, to speak to the people. It is reported that he told them a fable.

There was once a time when the parts of the human body were in great disagreement, each part looking out for itself. There was one thing, though, that many parts of the body agreed upon. Or perhaps it would be too optimistic to say they had come to agreement. It's more that they had come to the same conclusion. The stomach got all the fruit of their labors. The rest of the parts did all the work and the stomach just sat there, enjoying itself, getting filled up. And so these offended members of the body entered a conspiracy. The hands refused to bring food to the mouth, the mouth would not accept any food if it were offered, and the teeth declined to chew it. The rest of the parts wanted to coerce the belly by starving it. But, alas, body and all its members wasted away, and the whole body was reduced to the last stage of exhaustion. Then it became evident that the stomach rendered no small service. The nourishment the stomach received was no greater than that which it gave back by sustaining the whole body and keeping it strong.¹

This story told by Livy, and many other stories similar to it, were common in the ancient world. Everyone has to do his or her part, and do it well, or the whole thing falls apart.

This idea is a commonplace still today. Everyone needs to contribute. There's no I in the word team. We're all in this together. Perhaps one of the most striking and successful employments of this idea comes from the New England Patriots football team. Now, I know some of you are ready for football season to be long gone. I know some of you won't even watch today's big game, perhaps the last time Brady and Manning face one another. I know some of you hate sports as a metaphor for life and religion. But bear with me. Don't bear with me just because this afternoon's game is huge, though it is, or because I'm a diehard Patriots fan, which I am. Bear with me because, well, just trust me on this one.

The New England Patriots under Coach Bill Belichick has been one of the most successful teams of all time. And the odd thing is they have not because they have superstar players. Belichick often trades his high draft picks away for lower picks. Tom Brady, perhaps the best quarterback of all time, is not the most athletic quarterback of all time. He was drafted 199th when he came out of college. The Patriots are among the best teams ever under Belichick because he preaches the mantra, Do your job. He means every member of the team, every player and coach, has a part to play. Every part is important to the team. And if you play your part well, and everyone else does the same, then the team will succeed. The Patriots won last year's Super Bowl because one unheralded first-year player perfectly executed an obscure defensive play that the coaches had had the team practice several times in the unlikely event they encountered it in a

¹ Livy, *History of Rome*, ed. Canon Roberts, History of Rome (Roberts) (Medford, MA: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1912).

game. There were seconds to go. Seattle was on the goal line and just about to win the game. But the defense recognized Seattle's play and Malcom Butler, who wasn't even drafted out of college, undercut the passing route, intercepted the pass and won the game. Do your job. For those of you who like this sort of thing, there's a great YouTube video where you can see how the whole thing unfolded, how the team practiced it and everything. It's a great watch.

Do your job. This idea older than ancient Rome and as current as today is no doubt what Paul had in mind when he wrote, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body."

"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.'"

"If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

Paul wants to say that the body of Christ, the church, is just like the human body. Every part of the church has a job to do, and it's important that every part do its job. If we all pull together, then we will thrive, Paul says. Do your job, and our church will be like the New England Patriots, successful beyond the ability of any one of us.

And of course Paul is right. We all have a job in the smooth running community, and it's important that each of us strives to do our job well.

But that's not the end of it. For those who hate sports metaphors and rah, rah team, for those of you whom I asked to hang in there and trust me, your moment has come. In the end, while the church thrives when its parts function well together, the church community is almost nothing like a successful football team, or at least it shouldn't be.

Paul understands this, and he tries to extend the metaphor of the body parts to make his point. He gets a little entangled in his own logic when he says that the weaker parts of the body are the ones we cover up because they're really the most honorable or important. He comes perilously close to getting a little too graphic here, and ultimately the metaphor doesn't serve him very well. Paul wants to say that in the body of Christ, in the church community, the weaker parts must be valued. This includes the parts that may not work very well. This isn't just the idea that weak parts still play important roles, so we need them. It's not like saying your little finger or your ear lobe—maybe not the most important parts, but they have a role.

Belichick may not draft superstars, but his team depends on professional players playing extremely well as individuals and as a team. Paul, I think, is after something a little more radical. Weaker parts of the body are to be valued as necessary members not just because they can contribute something, but the weaker parts are to be valued because it says something about the way the body of Christ thinks of itself. The definition of the body of Christ, the church community is that everyone is included in and valued in it, everyone. You don't have to try out or make the cut. The body of Christ works when it values and includes everyone irrespective of their measurable contributions.

This may sound like a small point or a sentimental idea, but it's anything but. In Nazi Germany Adolph Hitler sought to cultivate a perfect society, a society in which good strong members all played their important roles. In Hitler's mind that meant that certain people would need to be eliminated. Jews and Gypsies, Homosexuals and people with disabilities, Poles and other Slavs would all have to go. Hitler set about making his pure, finely tuned society. He attempted to systematically eliminate all of these groups. Hitler would have had no trouble with the idea that a healthy and productive society was like a perfectly coordinated healthy and productive body composed of flawless parts each doing its own job.

At the same time that Hitler was attempting to purge Germany and even the world of the people that didn't fit his ideal a young German pastor and theologian was experimenting with a totally different idea of community. In a small rural German town near the Baltic Sea, in what is now in northwest Poland, Dietrich Bonhoeffer directed an illegal residential seminary of the resistance church. Bonhoeffer was convinced that the church needed Christian communities based in a true understanding of the Gospel. After the Gestapo shut the seminary down in 1938 Bonhoeffer wrote a description of life at the seminary, really more a manual for building a Christian community. He called it *Life Together*.

Among his most important insights in *Life Together* is that no community is a perfectly functioning body of perfectly functioning members. Indeed, great disaster awaits trying to make such a community. He says, "On innumerable occasions a whole Christian community has been shattered because it has lived on the basis of a wishful image. ... Christians who are put in a community for the first time will often bring with them a very definite image of what Christian communal life should be, and they will be anxious to realize it. But God's grace quickly frustrates all such dreams. A great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves, is bound to overwhelm us ..."²

"The sooner this moment of disillusionment comes over the individual and the community, the better for both. ... Every human idealized image that is brought into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be broken up so that genuine community can survive. Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community"³

"Those who dream of this idealized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by others, and by themselves. They enter the community of Christians with their demands, set up their own law, and judge one another and even God accordingly."⁴

Bonhoeffer's first insight that attempting to construct the perfect community is bound to fail. He says the sooner the better. For the longer the idea of an ideal community exists, the more destructive it will be.

But Bonhoeffer wants to say something even more fundamental. It's not just that a perfect community is unattainable and that striving for it is destructively distracting. He says, "Every Christian community must know that not only do the weak need the strong, but also that the strong cannot exist without the weak. The elimination of the weak is the death of the community."⁵ Using a poignant image he remarks, "The exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people, from everyday Christian life in community may actually mean the exclusion of Christ; for in the poor sister or brother, Christ is knocking at the door."⁶

Christ belongs in the church. Surely we must not leave him knocking at the door. Amen.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Müller, Albrecht Schönherr, and Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, vol. 5, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 35.

³ 35–36.

⁴ 36.

⁵ 96.

⁶ 45–46.