

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 17, 2007**

LIFE IN THE BODY

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Pull a dollar bill out of your wallet, or a coin from your pocket or change purse, and if you look carefully you will find the Latin words *E Pluribus Unum*. It is the motto found on the Great Seal of the United States. It was originally chosen in 1776 by a committee of the Continental Congress consisting of Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, but not adopted officially by Congress until six years later (in 1782).

The phrase *E Pluribus Unum*, of course, means “out of many, one” and refers to the idea that the United States is one nation consisting of several different states. Out of many, one nation. From the many – from the original 13 independent colonies – one united nation. Though our country has grown from the original 13 states to the 50 states plus the District of Columbia and other territories today, the vision remains the same: From the many states, and from different races, backgrounds and nations of origin, one united nation.

Paul could very well have used this motto in 1 Corinthians 12 in his description of the church as the body of Christ. He uses the physical human body as a metaphor for the church, an analogy to explain how the church is designed to function in the purpose of God.

Several times in this passage Paul makes the point that though it is made up of many constituent parts and consists of many members, they are all part of one body. Notice what he says beginning in verse 12:

This body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized in one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many (vv. 12-14).

A little later, in verse 20, he says:

As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

And again, in verse 27, to emphasize his point:

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

In the body of Christ, as in the human body, there are many parts, but only one body. *E pluribus Unum*. Out of many, one.

“The body” is not the only image or metaphor of the church found in the Bible, but it is Paul’s distinctive way of describing it. In fact, he uses the word “body” (Greek *soma*) 18 times in this passage in 1 Corinthians 12. But this is not the only place where Paul uses the image of the body to describe the church. In Romans 12:4-5, for example, he says:

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

In Ephesians 4 Paul writes:

There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:4-6).

In Christ – through faith in Him – we are all united in one body. In all of our differentness and diversity, we express and experience a fundamental unity in the body of Christ under the Lordship of Christ. *E Pluribus Unum*. Our of many, one.

A little later in Ephesians 4 Paul says that God called and gifted some in the church to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers, in order to prepare God’s people (all of us) for works of service in His name. For what purpose? “So that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. From Him,” Paul says, from Christ, the Head of the church, “the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:11-13, 16).

The church, you see, is a body not a business. It is “the body of Christ.” It is a living organism, not merely an organization – although every church body has some kind of organization, and it has been rightly pointed out that if you don’t have “organized religion,” you’ll just end up with “disorganized religion.”

There are many parts in the body. The body has not one but many members. But there is just one body. And in the body of Christ, as in the human body, every member matters. Every part of the body has a particular role to play. Each member of the body has a job to do. A function to perform. A purpose to fulfill.

There are three main points about life in the body of Christ that I want you to see from this passage.

1. WE NEED EACH OTHER.

Notice what Paul says in verse 21:

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!”

And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”

Nor, as Paul says in verse 15, would the foot cease to be part of the body if it said: “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body.”

The bottom line is this: In the body of Christ, we need each other, not only for the health of the body as a whole, but to enable each individual member to operate at full potential.

There is an old Jewish fable about the interrelationship of different parts of the body. In this fable the more active and visible parts of the body got together and decided to starve the stomach because, the way they saw it, the stomach did nothing – no work at all – in return for all the effort they had to expend in order to feed it. So they went on strike against the stomach. They were going to teach the stomach a thing or two! Of course, it didn’t take long for them to discover how dependent they were on the stomach being fed regularly.

The point is: We need each other in the body. It is true in the human body. And it is true in the church, the body of Christ. We need each other. And we belong to each other.

A few years ago there was a quiz show on TV called “*The Weakest Link*.” It was kind of a cross between “*Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*” and “*Survivor*.” It may still be on in syndication, I don’t know. Each show would begin with seven players working together to try to win big bucks by answering questions correctly. At the end of each round, the contestants would vote to remove the player they considered “the weakest link.” The host of the show would then make cutting comments about the contestant voted out before saying: “You are the weakest link. Good-bye.”

Friends, that is not how it works in the body of Christ. That is not how it works in the church. At least that is not the way it works when we live up to our calling and function the way God designed the church to function. We don’t go after those whom some might call “the weakest link” and try to get rid of anyone.

We understand that no one can rightly say: “I’m useless. I have nothing to offer.” And no part of the body can say, with an air of smug superiority or an attitude of self-sufficiency, to another part of the body: “I don’t need you.” The stronger or more spiritually mature members do not – and must not – say to those who are weaker or less mature: “We don’t need you. We don’t want you. Good-bye.”

No. Every member of the body matters. Every part of the body has an important contribution to make, even those parts that seem to be weaker or less honored.

In order to be the church God wants us to be and to function the way God wants us to function, we need each other. I need you, and you need each other.

Some people believe they don’t need the church, they don’t need to come to church, they don’t need to be part of the church in order to live as a follower of Christ. They think

they can go it alone in the Christian life. They think they can be “lone ranger Christians.” But that is not the way God designed it. That is not the way God intended – or intends – for us to live the Christian life. The Christian life is designed to be lived in community. In a relationship to God but also in relationship with others. In connection with other parts of the body of Christ. In relationships of interdependence. Not independence.

Maybe you’ve heard the old story about a visit Dwight L. Moody made to a prominent Chicago businessman. The man said to Moody: “I believe I can be just as good a Christian without the church as I can be with it.”

Moody said nothing in response. Instead, he went over to the fireplace where a fire was blazing to give heat against the winter cold. He removed a single burning coal and placed it on the hearth. The two men sat in silence as the ember died out.

“I see,” said the other man. “I’ll be in church on Sunday.”

We belong to each other in the body of Christ. We need each other. Alone, cut off from one another, the fire of our faith and love can grow dim. But when we recognize our interdependence and work together we can do remarkable things in the power of Christ who gives us strength (Philippians 4:13).

Herman Ostry is a farmer in Nebraska. His barn floor was under more than two feet of water because of a flooding creek. So he invited some of his friends over to a barn raising. His plan was to move the entire 17,000- pound barn to a new foundation on higher ground 143 feet away. His son devised a lattice work of steel tubing, and nailed, bolted and welded it on the inside and the outside of the barn. Then he attached hundreds of handles. After one practice lift, 344 of Herman Ostry’s closest friends and neighbors slowly walked the barn up a slight incline, each of them supporting less than 50 pounds. In just three minutes, the barn was on its new foundation.

That is a picture of what the body of Christ can do. All of us together can do way more than any of us on our own. We need each other in the body of Christ. When we belong to Christ, we belong to each other. And every member matters.

2. WE ARE ALL DIFFERENT FROM ONE ANOTHER.

Even though this is intuitively obvious, it needs to be said – and understood. We differ from one another for good reason. A body that is all eyes or all ears or just a giant foot isn’t a body. Each member of the body of Christ, as David Prior says, is unique, distinctive, irreplaceable, and unrepeatable. There has never been a member of Christ’s body just exactly like you. Or me. And there is a particular role in the body that God has uniquely designed each of us to perform.

The body of Christ, thank God, is not made up of cookie-cutter Christians! Can you imagine how boring it would be if we were all alike? And how impractical it would be if

we were all eyes, or thumbs, or elbows? There is marvelous diversity in the human body and in the body of Christ. God did not make us “one size fits all.”

We all differ from one another. We have been designed by God to complement one another – that is “complement” with an “e.” We were designed by God to fit well together. To work well together. To play on each other’s gifts and strengths. With each member doing his/her part for the healthy functioning of the whole.

We have also been designed by God to compliment one another – with an “i.” That is, God designed us and desires us to affirm and encourage one another. To pat one another on the back. To build one another up in love. To appreciate one another and the distinctive contribution each member of the body makes.

Let me ask you:

Have you found your distinctive role, your ministry niche in the body?

Have you looked for it?

Have you prayed about it?

Have you asked God to show you where and how you fit best in the body?

We are not all the same. That is by God’s design. God has a place and a plan and a purpose for every member of the body. And I’m convinced the body of Christ will reach its full potential in God’s service – we at Faith will reach our full potential as a church – only as each member does its part. For the glory of God. For the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7). And for the spread of the good news of the kingdom of God.

3. WE ARE CALLED TO CARE FOR ONE ANOTHER IN THE BODY.

In verses 25 and 26, Paul says there is to be no division, no dissension, no schism in the body, but every part should have respect and concern for one another. Every part of the body should care for one another.

When one part of the body is hurting or in pain, the whole body feels it. And when one member is honored or has a reason to celebrate, the whole body shares its joy. As Paul says in Romans 12:15, we are to “rejoice with those who rejoice” and to “mourn with those who mourn.”

The way we care for one another is by knowing one another and by entering into each other’s joys and sorrows. By sharing our hopes and disappointments, our hurts and heartaches, our victories and our struggles. We come alongside one another to support one another and to spur one another on.

In effect, we “one another” one another. We love one another. We serve one another. We honor one another above ourselves. We bear with one another. We pray for one another. We comfort one another. We encourage one another. We share with one

another. We forgive one another. We bear one another's burdens. And in so doing, we fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

E Pluribus Unum. Out of many, one.

“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts, and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. Now you (we) are the body of Christ, and each one of you (us) is a part of it” (1 Corinthians 12:12, 27).

In the body of Christ which is the church, we need each other. We are all different from each other. And we are called to care for one another in the love of Christ.

Lord, let it be so in us. Let it be so in this church. To the glory of Your name. Amen.