

“A HEALTHY CHURCH”

Ephesians 4:1-8, 11-16 1 Corinthians 12:4-12, 26-27

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Most of us, I believe, when we begin to consider the qualities of a church – this congregation, or any other one we happen to visit or have interactions with – focus on one or two of the facets that particularly matter to us. Is the worship service meaningful to me? Are the people caring and friendly? Does the sanctuary feel like a sacred space? What kind of programs and activities are there? What beliefs and values are espoused? How does this church express its values beyond its walls? Zeroing in on one or two such questions is probably natural, at least at first. It’s only when you get more deeply connected that you begin to see that the life of a church is complex and dynamic and involves quite a lot of different activities and processes and parts. No wonder the Apostle Paul made such use of the metaphor of the human body to understand the nature of the church!

I’ve never heard anyone suggest that maybe he had knowledge of anatomy... but it wouldn’t surprise me. The metaphor is so familiar that it seems almost like a cliché to us, but when you really stop and think about it, it’s pretty profound. The human body is a beautiful and complicated conglomeration of structures and systems that somehow must function together in order to live, move, grow, think, feel, and act. Some of that functioning is easy for anyone to see; some isn’t. A person might look like the picture of health, but have a physical or mental illness that isn’t obvious. A small problem, like an infection, can cause severe pain. And ultimately everything is connected: physical illness can lead to depression, and vice versa; chronic stress takes a toll on anyone’s body, a better diet can improve functioning on so many levels.

Organizational experts and family therapists today make extensive use of “systems theory,” to understand relationships within groups, but Paul seems to have understood it two millennia ago, as he compared a community of faith to the human body.

Like the human body, a community of faith can take good care of itself and live a healthy life on many levels. It can sometimes be faced with pain and struggle to heal because of things beyond its control. It can appear to be functioning really well, yet have some limitations that aren’t evident at a glance.

Being in ministry for a long time, and involved not just in pastoring but with other churches in the larger world of the Presbyterian Church, has given me plenty of opportunities to witness ways that congregations can be not-so-healthy: Staff members compete and undermine each other. Clergy get involved in inappropriate relationships. Congregation members treat their pastor like a servant hired to do their bidding. The Session allows one loud and negative person to control the agenda. Financial obligations are ignored. Funds are spent without accountability or transparency or thought for the long term. A few long-time members “run” the church.

Communication is haphazard. The church's focus is inward, with little engagement outside their doors, or alternatively, energy is poured into worthy projects while little attention is paid to relationships. Change and new ideas are looked on with suspicion. Nobody can say anything coherent about the church's mission.

Anytime I happen to hear about these kinds of things happening in congregations, I feel tremendously grateful to be at Westminster, where pastors and staff are appreciated, and integrity and responsibility around finances is intentional, where many people share leadership, where both relationships and engagement with the world around are considered important, where core values and shared intentions guide decisions. I'm certainly not saying that we are perfect, or that every single aspect of our life together functions equally well all the time. That wouldn't be true ever (of us, or of any church, probably) – and certainly the pandemic has meant that we've struggled to keep up with some things. But every year when I help pull together the annual report, I am once again amazed and grateful to see the many ways in which life of this community of faith is healthy and functional and vibrant.

Every worship service is the product of the combined creativity, skills, time, and energy of a bunch of people. Our building is cared for in proactive ways, as well as when "fixing something" is required. Giving is not grudging or from a sense of duty or habit, but out of commitment and in response to solid leadership in stewardship. The ways we engage with our community and world emerge organically from the concerns folks have on their hearts – poverty, hunger, racism, climate change. Our Session functions as a team, and has the trust of the congregation. Though it hasn't been easy, over the past two years we've made a lot of necessary adaptations to the realities of covid, and we've all done whatever we can do to remain connected and involved. I think you will share my sense of appreciation for all this and more as you read the Annual Report from 2021.

But I got to wondering about what it is that makes the healthy (or healthy-ish) functioning of a church like ours possible. It's more than loving each other, doing good things in the world, or having lively, meaningful worship. A community of faith can have any or all of that going for it, and still not *function* in a healthy and sustainable way in things like leadership, decision-making, finances, trust and integrity, and so on.

In his letters to the churches at Corinth and Ephesus (and also Rome, Galatia, and others), Paul concerns himself a lot with the health of these communities of faith. His perspective helps me better understand what's going on here.

The biggest and most obvious thing is that a healthy community honors and makes use of a diversity of gifts. In the two passages we read this morning, he lists a number of gifts, including learning, wisdom, leadership, pastoring, healing, evangelism, "various kinds of tongues," and prophetic ministry. In his letter to the Romans he also mentions teaching, ministering (or "deaconing"), generous giving, and compassion. The fact that the lists are different suggests that they aren't exhaustive lists but just examples of some of the many gifts God gives to the church, and that perhaps the gifts bestowed on the church are different in different times and

places. The bigger point seems to be that in a healthy community of faith, you should be able to see a lot of different kinds of gifts in action... and recognized for the way they contribute to the life of the church. It's not just that this gift and that one are great things in and of themselves, but that there is a beauty and power and rightness in the way they fit together and complement each other and merge in a shared intention.

I suppose it's possible to bring a diversity of gifts together for a bad or unworthy purpose, just as much as a person could use their physical health and strength solely for selfish or cruel reasons. But Paul gives this "all the parts of the body together" image a larger context that clarifies the common purpose:

The church is supposed to function in a way that is "worthy of our calling" - which is to follow Jesus and continue his ministry in the world - that's what it is to be "the body of Christ." We sometimes forget that this "body" image is an image of a living, breathing, growing organism. So we can't ever say, 'yes, we have it all figured out what that means.' Instead, we have lively questions that we have to keep coming back to: What is Jesus is calling us to *now*? Are we being faithful to that calling? Does what we do match what we say we believe and value?

The gifts that each person brings serve that calling when they are called forth by, empowered by, infused with grace by the Spirit of God. There's a lot we could say about what that means, but it certainly implies that there must be prayer and listening and humility and integrity in the way we offer our gifts. And it explains why, sometimes to our amazement, our stumbling efforts to serve and work together turn out to be more powerful, beautiful, and meaningful than we ever would have expected. We are more than the sum of our parts... and that's the Spirit of God at work.

And of course we always come back to love. Is love what shapes the common purposes we share? Is love the motivation that leads us to put our time, energy, talents, and resources into this community of faith? Does love guide the way we do all the things we do in the church, from budget-making to deacons' ministry, from worship words to mission projects? Does love help us look beyond ourselves to our neighbors? It's really true that love changes everything.

I'm grateful, and I hope you are also, to be able to witness and be part of a living example of Paul's words. But I want to remind us not to take it for granted. We have to keep living it, and live into it more. Our health, as we know, is precious, worth taking care of, and always, always to be celebrated with gratitude. Amen.