

2005 Charles A. Trentham Award Winner

Unity in Diversity  
Romans 12: 1-8

Rev. Paul Drake  
Speed Memorial Church, Speed, Indiana

Paul exalts diversity in Romans 12, likening us to a body, each part with its own role to play.

“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.” (Romans 12:4-5) Paul gives us a very good image of what the church is meant to be – one body with many members, each with his or her own function. Bill Cosby used to talk about how there was a war going on between the mind and the body. He said, “The mind is egotistical. It’s the mind that says to the hand, when you have to get up in the middle of the night, ‘Don’t turn on that light! I know my way around here.’ Meanwhile the toes are saying, ‘Turn on the light, please! We’re not going through this again.’”

That’s a humorous way of looking at this topic. But make no mistake about it; this is a very serious matter indeed. Our minds and bodies are amazing examples of unity. Not uniformity, mind you, but unity. Each part has its own function, but all are working together toward one goal: to build up and strengthen the body, the whole.

A number of years ago, I was on a car trip with a visitor from Brazil. Along the way we stopped at a gas station to fill up the tank and get some soda. Gerusa began reading the instructions on the top of her can of Coke. Showing how long ago this was, the new pull tabs on cans – you know, the kind that don’t pull off but are attached, like we’ve all gotten used to now – had just come out. And there was printed instructions on the top of each can. They said, “1. Pull up tab. 2. Push tab down. 3. Pull tab back.” For some reason, we all found that hysterically funny, and began adding our own instructions to the list. “4. Open mouth. 5. Lift can. 6. Tilt can. 7. Pour soda. 8. Drink soda. 9. Swallow. 10. Digest, and so on and on. I forget exactly how many steps we got out of that one simple act of drinking from a can. I’ll bet you never realized taking a drink of Coke was such a complicated procedure.

But if you were making a flow chart to program a computer to drink soda from a can, you would have to break the process down into all those discrete steps. You couldn’t assume the computer would do anything, no matter how small, without being told what to do and exactly how to do it. That’s a clear demonstration of just how amazing our bodies really are. All the parts work together in unity, each performing its functions almost without even thinking about it.

But the parts are not all the same. If they were, we couldn’t function at all. There are no two cells in my entire body (and at 6’2” and 235lbs., that covers a lot of territory) that are exactly alike. There are similar types of cells – muscle, blood cells, nerves, bones, etc. But the body is not made up of just one of these types of cells, either. It would be a disaster if it were. As Paul points out when he deals with this topic another time, “If the whole body were an eye, how could it hear? And if it were only an ear, how

could it smell? As it is, however, God put every different part in the body just as he wanted it to be.” (1 Corinthians 12:17-18)

I suspect that where I’m going next will leave some of you convinced I’ve gone off the deep end. Our Christian brothers and sisters in the Episcopal Church have been struggling with their decision to consecrate an openly homosexual bishop, the Rev. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire. His earlier selection by his Diocese was confirmed last summer by the House of Bishops by a vote of 62-45, not as close as some expected it to be. This action was taken despite threats and dire predictions of a split in the denomination as a result. While many local congregations and dioceses have undergone upheaval, the denomination here in the U.S. and the Anglican Communion have stopped short of outright disunion, so far at least. We’ll see what happens in the future.

I’ll be honest and say outright that I applaud the Episcopal Church for having the courage to consecrate Bishop Robinson. If, as I believe and more and more Christians are beginning to believe, homosexuality is not a choice but the way a certain percentage of people are made to be, then Bishop Robinson and others like him could be some of those different parts of the body of Christ that God made “just as he wanted it to be”, to quote that other Paul. That may be so even though a number of Christians reject the idea.

Our Sunday School class, as we have been studying Phil Yancey’s book *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, struggled with the chapter he titled “Grace-Healed Eyes.” There he writes about his long friendship with Mel White, an evangelical who used to work with the Christian Coalition and helped edit films for the Dobson group, Focus On the Family. Yancey talks about how shocked he was when, a few years ago, Mel came to him to say that he was gay and had been living a lie all those years. If you want to know all the details, you’ll have to read the book (either Phil Yancey’s or, better yet, Mel White’s book, *Stranger at the Gate*).

The bottom line is that, although Phil couldn’t agree with Mel’s decision to leave his wife and come out of the closet, they remained friends. He quotes Mel White’s mother, told by an interviewer that many Christians were calling her son an ‘abomination’: “Well, he may be an abomination, but he’s still our pride and joy.” Yancey sums up his comments by saying, “I came to see that Mel White’s mother expressed how God views every one of us. In some ways we are all abominations to God – all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God – and yet somehow, against all reason, God loves us anyhow. Grace declares that we are still God’s pride and joy.”

Just remember, it hasn’t been all that long ago that some Christians felt the same way and made the same arguments against the ordination of blacks or women. In fact, some Christian denominations are still struggling with accepting those different parts of the body as legitimate.

I think back to a time not so long ago at Speed Memorial Church, when Margaret Stouffer was the first woman elected to the Board of Trustees. In the official church history, Veva Riggle Walker is mentioned as having served as deaconess some decades before, but that was during the war years of the 1940’s, when many such things were done out of necessity. Electing a woman to the Church Council was a pretty controversial step to some members in 1978. Today, of course, nearly half of the Council members are women, and it’s no longer shocking to see women serving the communion elements. Looking back from 25 years later, the idea that women should not be leaders in the congregation seems downright silly.

My fervent hope is that one of these days we'll have advanced to the point where we welcome people of color in our pews and would be ready to accept a black or Hispanic Council member. And maybe somewhere down the line (hopefully when I'm ready to retire after 20-some glorious years in this pulpit) you all would be ready to accept a woman pastor, or a black or Hispanic pastor, or even, God forbid, a black or Hispanic woman pastor! And 25 years later, I hope the idea of *that* being something controversial would seem downright silly to new generations of church members.

I've been reading a book titled *The Passion Driven Congregation*, by Carver McGriff and Kent Millard. They have been pastors of St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Indianapolis for the past 38 years between them. During that time, the church grew from 300 members to over 5,000 members, with an average attendance in worship of 3,100. Listen to what Carver McGriff says he decided the church should be that led to such long, sustained growth.

One of the first things a pastor must decide is the answer to the question, "What is a church?" That decision will determine the future for any congregation; I decided I would welcome everyone into my congregation. Old-time Methodists, of course. But so, too I'm on pretty solid ground so far, right? There's not too much disagreement with anything I've said up 'til now, I hope. But I just can't leave well enough alone. There's a reason for this, though. It's easy to talk about and achieve unity when we're all in agreement. But this sermon is about unity in diversity, just as I believe Paul meant when he said we are one body in Christ, but made up of many members with different gifts: homosexuals, divorced people, retired thieves, drug addicts, Presbyterians, struggling alcoholics, reforming prostitutes and Sunday morning golfers would be welcomed to my church. I encouraged my ordained colleagues to hold whatever theological beliefs they chose so long as those beliefs did not produce prudish judgmentalism... From the day I stepped into the pulpit of St. Luke's Church I insisted that anyone who walks through our door is welcome as part of our family. (*The Passion Driven Congregation*, p. 22)

I personally find that vision of the body of Christ a compelling and attractive one. To me, it's just a slight extension of Paul's stand in the first century. We constantly need to be reminded of the truth that the church is a hospital for sinners, not a haven for saints. Or, as J.B. Phillips insisted a generation or two ago, anytime you are tempted to exclude anyone, "Your God is too small." One author said about the Community Church Movement, "Our unity has not come from denying differences, has not come from ignoring the importance of differences. Our unity has developed from granting others the same freedom of personal faith and understanding we cherish for ourselves. The way to real unity lies in recognizing and accepting that uniformity is neither possible nor necessary in our changing world." (Sterling McHarg, in *Unity Without Uniformity*, p. 52)

Unity in diversity is tough, because it is human nature to make absolute judgments based on our highly individualized experiences of life. As Christians, though, we are called to rise above human nature. Unity in diversity is only possible when we learn to tolerate one another's differences, then to respect and value them, and finally to celebrate them.

One of the reasons I was drawn to the ICCC is that it remains the most integrated church organization in the United States. It does so in spite of the fact that the vast

majority of congregations in the ICCC are predominantly either black or white. Relatively few of our congregations are significantly racially mixed. But we all gain something when we get together and learn from each other. When my friend Herb Freitag, a white pastor of a largely white, suburban congregation, talks about his friendship with Darneau Stewart, a black pastor of an inner-city black congregation, I get goose bumps sometimes. The honesty and the love of that relationship, that is apparent in his voice 30 years after Darneau passed away, is a beautiful and transforming thing. When Karen and I worshipped with my friend Matthew Stephens and his mostly black congregation at the Community Church of Cincinnati last summer, we experienced the joy of unity in diversity. When I see Marion Bascom and Bob Puckett (two older preachers now retired, one black and one white) hug each other and say to one another, with all sincerity, "I love you with the love of the Lord", I confess to being moved. To me, that's what Christianity should be and is all about.

I want to close by sharing a story from Tony Campolo's book *Let Me Tell You a Story*. Tomas Borge was a freedom fighter in the Nicaraguan revolution. He was captured and put in a dungeon. There he was chained to the wall, and in his helpless condition, was forced to watch as his captors dragged in his wife and gang raped her in front of him. Then they castrated him in an attempt to take away the last vestiges of manhood.

When the revolution had succeeded, Borge was released, and he paraded before cheering crowds as one of the nation's heroes. But as he marched, he noticed in the crowd the face of one of his captors. It was one of the men who had raped his wife.

Borge broke ranks from the parade, ran over to where the man was standing, grabbed him by the shoulders, shook him and yelled, "Do you remember me? Do you remember me?"

The trembling and confused man could only answer in his fear, "Yes! Yes!"

The trembling man pretended he had never seen Borge before. But Borge persisted and screamed, "I will never forget your face! Never!" Then he asked, "Now do you understand what this revolution is all about?"

Borge responded, "No, you don't understand." Then he embraced the man and shouted, "I forgive you! I forgive you! That's what this revolution is all about!" (*Let Me Tell You a Story*.)

That is a reflection of the love Christ has for each of us in all our diversity. Although we crucified him and put him through hell because of our sinfulness, he still embraces us and forgives us – each and every one of us. It is because of his great love and amazing grace that we are able to find unity in diversity. That's why I sing:

Your grace still amazes me.

Your love's still a mystery.

Each day, I fall on my knees

'Cause your grace still amazes me. (Shawn Craig and Connie Harrington)

Amen.