

## One Body

### Romans 12:1-8

Have you wondered about your role, your gift, your part in the body of Christ? While preparing for this sermon on Paul's letter to the Romans I found this little story from an unknown author in the book *Stories for the Heart*. It is called The Hand.

A Thanksgiving Day editorial in the newspaper told of a school teacher who asked her first graders to draw a picture of something they were thankful for. She thought of how little these children from poor neighborhoods actually had to be thankful for. But she knew that most of them would draw pictures of turkeys on tables with food. The teacher was taken aback with the picture Douglas handed in... a simple childishly drawn hand. But whose hand? This class was captivated by the abstract image. "I think it must be the hand of God that brings us food," said one child. "A farmer," said another, "because he grows the turkeys." Finally when the others were back at work the teacher bent over Douglas' desk and asked whose hand it was. "It's you hand, Teacher," he mumbled.

In the same way that the teacher now understood that she was the hand, in our scripture today Paul's use of the concept of "body" offers us the opportunity to explore the ways that we as individuals, as a congregation, and the church as a whole, are a part of the one body.

First Paul tells us to "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice." Most of us in the twenty-first century have no point of reference for presenting a dead sacrifice to God. Sacrificing animals by way of atonement for sin or as a gift of thanksgiving is so

removed from our experience that we have difficulty understanding what this meant in to the original receivers of this letter.

Sacrifice in popular usage usually connotes something negative. Parents of Olympic athletes make economic sacrifices for the training of their children. Employees are asked to sacrifice raises or benefits when a company falls on hard times. A heroic soldier sacrifices his life to save his comrades. This last example is one of the few involving a physical body, and in that case sacrifice means death or severe injury.

Paul calls on us as believers to present our bodies as *living* sacrifices. This does not seem to indicate a "take up your cross" to die physically in the course of our discipleship. Paul claims when we offer ourselves as living sacrifices we will be able to discern and live into the will of God. This forces us to go beyond mysterious, emotional, intellectual, or just going along with God's will as we consider what implications there might be for our very bodies as we live out our discipleship to God. This means we might need to actually *do* things that will put us outside the norms of behavior for our society, and wrapping our minds around what we do day to day in our lives that expresses God's will.

We are called, each according to our gifts, to use our bodies as prophets, ministers, teachers, exhorters, givers, leaders, and in acts of cheerful compassion. We admit to ourselves, and then live out in our lives, the reality that the world does not revolve around us as individuals. "It is not about you," Paul seems to be saying, "and that includes your body." This does not mean that some other person can control our bodies, or that following God means letting another human being abuse our bodies. For Paul, "sacrifice" is a positive term of consecration—of dedication to the will and the work of God that results in the use of gifts through the body—not the abuse of the body as a sign of submission to God or anyone else.

Paul then expands the body metaphor to describe the church. He asks us to consider ourselves parts of a human body in which each part has different functions, each part

has value, and each part is as intimately connected to the other as the head, neck, and torso of a human body are. Each part of the body works, not to bring glory to itself or to meet only its needs, but to ensure the healthy functioning of the whole system. The gifts of each member are to be used for the common good.

This reminds us of our common need for one another and that our gifts are to be used for the health of the community. When we remember this we will not think of ourselves more highly than we ought and this will help foster an atmosphere where our faith community may work together harmoniously and productively.

While there are certainly church members who may think *too* highly of themselves, there are also those with obvious gifts or skills who may not think highly *enough* of themselves, assuming they are not "good enough" to contribute. Paul's words challenge us to consider that *everyone*—every member of the body of Christ in the church—has a gift to contribute to the functioning of the body. This means that everyone's gifts are not only present, but *needed* for the living body of Christ to function in the world, as we seek to discern and live out the will of God. In this case, the "transformation of the mind" means that someone ceases to deny her or his gifts and steps out in faith, taking a risk to serve.

So, how does this one body apply to us in the West where we have every flavor of Christianity you can think of? What does one body mean for the church of Jesus Christ as a whole? From the beginning of its existence, the church has manifested the body of Christ in a great variety of ways. As much as Alexander Campbell or Barton Stone thought there was only one way to be church in the New Testament, "the early church," was a variety of Christian communities that did not all look exactly alike. From the beginning, different communities have structured their worship life, their governance, their teaching, and their theologies (what they understand about God) in various ways.

Rather than this helping us respect diversity, too often this has meant competition, conflict, and even hatred between Christians. When anyone comes up for a new idea or

innovation, we have acted as if the body of Christ has some major disease or cancer, or at least some dysfunction in the body. Rather than seeing the body as versatile and expressing its uniqueness, we have seen any divergence as subversive.

We are one body. As individual, we are to present our bodies as living sacrifices. We are one body. As a congregation we are to use our gifts we are to use our gifts for the building up of the faith community. We are one body. As the body of Jesus Christ we are work in cooperation with others to enact God's will in the world today. This will be our "spiritual" worship as we off God our whole body which includes our head, heart, and bankbook as a daily "living sacrifice." **Rochelle A. Stackhouse**

The teacher in our story recalled that frequently at recess she had taken Douglas, a scrubby forlorn child, by the hand. She often did that with the child. But it meant so much to Douglas. Perhaps this is what you do in the one body of Christ, not so much in materials ways, but in whatever small way that you encourage and give to others. We are one body.

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