

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“One in Christ”**

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*“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 one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free...” (1 Cor. 12:12-13).*

I know I told this story years ago, but it was a conversation that continues to have an impact on me. I was at a district pastors’ conference in Green Lake. It was a beautiful fall day, and I happened to know there was a very nice golf course just down the road. Problem was we were in a windowless hotel ballroom room, and the agenda was packed for the day. The keynote speaker was holding forth on catechesis. After the afternoon coffee break there would follow a battery of reports from various district execs, and then another line-up of reports from various organizations: Lutherans for Life, A Place of Refuge, Prison Ministry, worthy stuff, all of it, but did I tell you it was a beautiful day and there was a nice golf course just down the road?

I started organizing a foursome. Spotting a friend, I sent a surreptitious text to him, and within seconds received his message: “I’m in.” Then to another, and he replied, “Want to go now or should we wait for the coffee break?” That made three. During the coffee break, I found Pastor David Lieske, a good guy, the retired pastor from my home church. I knew he loved to golf, but he said, “Thanks for the offer, but I better decline.” I turned the screw, “Have you ever played Lawsonia? It’s very nice.” Once again, he demurred. “I don’t know David. I think I should stay here.” “Is it your shoulder?” “No, it’s not that. I just try to think what would happen if everyone at these conferences did as I did. I want to golf, I really do, but if *everyone* took off this afternoon, I’d feel awfully bad for the speakers coming in to find an empty room.”

I wish he hadn’t said it! He was right, of course, but I wish he hadn’t said it. Ever since, I’ve been pretty good about adhering to the agenda at conferences.

So, what would Watertown be like if everyone was just like you? Would there be fewer squabbles between neighbors, or more? Would morale at your workplace go up or down? And what about the church? What would this church be like if everyone was just like you? Would we be able to run a Sunday School and VBS? Would we be able to take a turn at Bread and Roses, or serve sandwiches in the park? How would attendance be in the summer months? How would the congregational singing be during the communion hymns? How would the budget be doing?

I know if everyone was just like me, our organ wouldn’t sound very good, our participation in Concordia Health Plan would be all messed up, the computers would be down, and the bathrooms would surely need attention. We need all kinds of people from all different backgrounds, with different skills, different interests, different abilities, different liabilities.

Sometimes we get it in our heads that if everyone were just a little more like we are, the world would be a better place. That’s foolishness. It’s also idolatry.

1 Cor. 12: “The body does not consist of one member but of many. . . If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? . . . As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.”

The man who wrote these words was addressing a small group of people in the Greek city of Corinth, about twenty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The people were new Christians. There weren’t many of them at this point. Prompting these words was the simple fact they were arguing with one another, and the arguments had become so bitter that everyone was choosing up sides. Each faction had their own priorities and was convinced the others were entirely wrong. They were even suing each other in the secular courts.

Here they were, a tiny little group of mostly poor people in a major seaport city, a bustling commercial center. It was also a center for open and unbridled immorality. It was a university town. Corinth had a theater, a synagogue and at least, a dozen temples to Greek gods, the most famous of which was the huge temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, just outside of town, which is said to have employed hundreds of cultic prostitutes. Here these Christians are, in the midst of all that, and instead of making careful plans about how to be faithful in that environment, how to say a good word about Jesus in a way that had a chance of being heard, instead they were burning up all their energy in squabbles.

Some of the Corinthians were so enthusiastic and spiritual they could speak in tongues. Some were so enlightened they could prophesy. Others had given away all they owned to prove their faithfulness. Some claimed Paul himself as their mentor and leader. Others invoked Peter’s name. And some said, “we belong only to Jesus.” It seemed the little church would soon fall apart at the seams.

The forces pulling them apart were strong. Think about it. In that part of the Roman Empire there were well-engrained cultural and economic divisions, and these same divisions were surely represented in the church of Corinth. There were slaves, there were free, business owners who were rich, the crippled who were poor, and those in the fine arts, and those in the ruling class, etc. These all carried with them distinctions of power and status. But now these people find themselves as part of the Corinthian church. They're all piled in together helter-skelter, like the animals in Noah's ark. Then throw into the Corinthian church a couple handfuls of Jewish people, who saw themselves as set apart from other nationalities, and who for centuries had been taught to stay separate from the nations. It's not so easy to ignore these distinctions, so of course this is a church that will struggle with unity.

Paul's response to the Corinthian Christians is to tell them again about the main thing, about a God who loves them so selflessly that he had become one of them, accepting their humanity, sharing their suffering, bearing their sin. That's who God is, Paul says. He is Christ crucified, the one cursed with our sins.

Paul goes on, however, to remind them that even though they come from many different backgrounds, they are one in Christ. This is not a man-made unity. It is a gift of God given through Holy Baptism. Paul reminds them of their baptisms, and says their baptismal unity is stronger than anything else that might divide them. Even if they come from different races, and radically different backgrounds, they are still one in Christ through Holy Baptism. Even if a member of the Grecian ruling elite from Corinth is standing next to a Jewish slave in that little church, their unity in Christ is stronger than anything that would divide them. Verse 13, "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free."

So it is today. You are baptized. You are a member of the body of Christ. No one should feel any less part of the body than another. "If the foot should 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 should 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."

Don't ever think yourself inferior, just because you don't have the most important role, or the most money, or education. In verse 29 Paul asks questions that demand the answer "no". "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues?" No! Of course not! Therefore no one should think themselves, (or be made to think themselves) second-rater or inferior if they do not possess these particular gifts or callings.

The church needs all kinds. "There are many gifts" Paul says. God gives them all. God uses them all. Each is important. Each is necessary. The church is like a body, and each part performs the function for which it is best suited. There are no extraneous parts.

Joseph Goebbels was the Nazi propaganda mastermind who helped launch Hitler's rise to power. He had extraordinary talent, but also streaks of raw wickedness, such as his hatred for the Jews and his love for himself. On February 15, 1943, in his diary he referred to a recent speech that, quote, "may prove to be one of my master pieces." It stirred the people into a "spiritual elation." Then he wrote, "If only it was possible to reproduce myself a million times over, so that I could achieve a million times what I can today." Can you imagine? Wasn't one Joseph Goebbels more than enough?

In his good wisdom, God has seen fit to create just one of each of us, completely unique, gifted, created to serve. Each of us brings to the table certain skills and abilities and experiences. Each of us can do something, but none of us has been called to do everything. What the world and church doesn't need is more replicas of me . . . or you. What the world needs is all of us to do what we've been gifted and called to do.

We are the baptized people of God. We are the body of Christ. We are Jesus to the world. Not by our own merits, but by Holy Baptism, which puts us into the communion of saints. Each of us has been marked with the sign of the cross, where Christ won the victory over sin. Each of us has been washed clean of sin with the water and the Word. In Holy Baptism, you were also rescued from death and the devil. In Baptism, you were given eternal salvation. In Baptism you were adopted as children of God, which means you are a brother or sister to all the other Christians in the world. What we share in Christ is far stronger than any racial differences. What we share in Christ is far stronger than any educational differences, or vocational achievements. What we share in Holy Baptism is stronger than family ties. Through Holy Baptism, we belong to Body of Christ. Each of us has gifts to use and share, each is important and necessary.

Verse 19, "If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body." Thanks be to God. Amen.