



January 21, 2007

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

“It’s Alive”

My husband, Gilles, coached soccer for many years while our children were growing up. It was great fun to watch the kids learn the sport.

When they were four or five, you couldn’t really say they played the game of soccer. They all just chased the ball around the field, bunched up like pirannhas around fresh meat. Every one wanted to get to the ball. And once a kid managed to get the ball and break away she’d head for the goal as a solo player. Oh, to score! That was the dream—that was the triumph!

What a thrill it was when they gradually began to learn teamwork. They did passing drills- over and over and over. They began to see how they could achieve more when each team member played a specific position. Then they each gradually and painfully learned how to STAY in that position.

They saw each goal scored was a triumph for the TEAM!!!- They realized each of them played a part in every successful goal. Every season Gilles organized a game between the kids and their parents. WOW! The parents discovered how difficult it is to play your position, how hard it can be to keep running in such a fast-paced sport. They learned a new respect for the kids, for their team, and for the sport in general. They toned down the comments they yelled to the kids from the sidelines. They became ENCOURAGERS who appreciated the kids' efforts in a fresh way.

The apostle Paul understood teamwork. He wrote a couple letters to the church he helped start in the city of Corinth. Those folks must have been pulling in opposite directions a lot of the time, because Paul hit one point over and over again: YOU ARE A TEAM!!! He didn’t use the team image, but he said much the same thing by using the image of a body. Like the members of a sports team, the parts of the

body all must work together. And when the parts work together, something amazing happens. The parts aren't just parts anymore.

When you watch a team playing your favorite sport- you're not just watching the members of the team. It's not just Susan, Dylan, Michael, Melissa, and Sam you see. You see a TEAM. A new entity has been created.

Likewise, when you look at a human body, you don't just see legs, arms, toes, ears and hair- you see a whole person. When the body's parts work together, we see a miracle: IT'S ALIVE!!! We marvel, maybe a little bit like Dr. Frankenstein when his creation was animated and began to move.

It seems the Christians in Corinth were unclear on the "team" or "body" reality of the church. They began to set up a hierarchy, a ladder of relative power and importance. Paul challenged these notions head on. He denied that any spiritual practices put a person into a spiritual elite. He emphasized that no gift granted by the Holy Spirit is better than any other gift. He taught each person HAS gifts from the Holy Spirit. He wrote to his people to try to dismantle the hierarchy being built in the church.

Paul wanted the Corinthians (and US today!) to see that it's just plain stupid to act like any part of the Body of the Christ is unimportant.

The eye can't say to the hand, "I don't need you!" The head can't say to the feet, "I don't need YOU." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and parts we think less honorable are to be treated with special honor.....There should be no division in the body, butits parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Sports teams struggle with this, too. But I think, in general, they understand it better than we do in the church. Most of the time we think our involvement in the church is an individual kind of thing. We each decide what we want to do, participate in, contribute, as an INDIVIDUAL. We don't recognize that our INDIVIDUAL choices affect other LIVING CELLS we are connected to.

Occasionally we wake up to that truth - especially when there is a change in the church. When people who have been active retire, move away, switch churches, or step down for a well-deserved break--- we become aware of how much their contributions mattered. We see that the ministry of the church, the work of Christ's body, DEPENDS upon a sizable GROUP of people actively involved and committed in its life. We sometimes panic, worried how the body can continue to

function, with some of the parts sitting down to rest that were going great guns for a long while.

Paul's image of the body should help us NOT to panic. It's a dynamic, changing image, because a body itself is dynamic and changing. A body does not repeat the same motions over and over again, but exhibits great variety of movement. The same parts CANNOT be continually moving in the same way—that would be a helpless body, like a remote-control car stuck against a wall, vainly trying to move forward. An effective body CHANGES the signals required to accomplish tasks, calling various parts at various times to assume a more or less active role.

Here's the deal. We are not just individuals here. We are parts of something much bigger than ourselves. Once you are baptized you become A PART OF THE BODY OF CHRIST—whether you like it or not-- whether you think it's fair or not-- whether you want God to handle things that way or not. IT IS HOW GOD IS WORKING IN THIS WORLD.

You see, God's Spirit lives in us as INDIVIDUALS, AND God's Spirit knits us together into a LIVING BODY, whose parts interact and form a creation of beauty and power.

What are the ways we resist this truth? Let's review:

First: we keep trying to act as disconnected individuals. When we do that, we are like a bunch of body parts piled up on a forensic examining table. This is not God's plan.

Second: We think there are OTHER people who will be the ACTIVE parts of Christ's body, and when they aren't here or take a rest, we are all sunk. The truth is ALL parts have times to be active and times to rest. Sometimes YOU will be a body part called to be ACTIVE. Don't be thinking because you're not a hand or eye you won't be needed.

Third: We have trouble with CHANGE—we think a particular way of moving this Body that has worked before is the way to keep going. We are like the toddler who can walk on tile floors just fine, but gets thrown for a loop on the uneven ground and grass outside. We know the toddler's movements that work inside will not work well on uneven ground. The toddler eventually learns this, too, and finds new ways to move that will keep him on his feet and charging around- inside AND out!

Fourth: We want OUR ideas, OUR needs, OUR gifts to be given top billing. This happens in all churches. And Paul makes it clear—NO body part is more important than another.

Sometimes I think, “Why on earth would God choose to operate this way?” But that’s exactly what God has done: He decided to operate this way ON EARTH- to work through this body made up of his wayward children. What a body to work with! All these parts that freeze up and don’t even move, in addition to the parts that are hyperactively over-functioning, and the parts that squabble and fight with each other! What an image!

Do you ever want to say, “Forget this!”? It can be so messy, to try to work together, to get along, to be honest and deal with all the feelings and responses that emerge when we really join in and engage with any group of human beings—maybe ESPECIALLY in the church. “I’m out of this,” we may say. But Paul tells us we’re not. It doesn’t matter what we think about it, we are ALWAYS a part of this body. The only question is whether we acknowledge it and seek direction from the head of the body--- CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD---- or just sit there as paralyzed body parts oblivious to our connection with all the others.

God’s Word teaches us today. It teaches that we are One Body, joined together by God. We are none of us MORE important than other parts. We are none of us LESS important than other parts. This is a MOVING Body. We cannot keep it frozen, we have to accept change.

To work effectively we must do two things: listen to our head- which is God himself- and pay attention to each other, because we body parts have to work together for the benefit of the WHOLE BODY. Otherwise, we become paralyzed or sick.

Friends, I beg you to accept God’s truth: YOU ARE A PART OF THE BODY OF CHRIST!!! This brings both honor and responsibilities. Will you accept both today???