I

“You are the Body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Cor 12:27). I want to leave you this morning with four key ideas that flow from that great affirmation of the Apostle Paul. I’d like to do so not only because Body Life is one of the great themes of the New Testament but, even more importantly, because it is essential to appreciating the awesome goodness and genius of the life to which God makes possible through the power of his Holy Spirit.

The first two ideas have to do with the incredible **UNITY** in the Body of Christ. In getting at that concept, let me encourage you to consider a simple physical analogy, visible all around you. Unless there is a medical miracle in our midst, chances are that the person sitting nearest to you right now has a physical body that consists of two major components -- a Head and a Torso. Any exceptions to that rule out there? Good.

Now -- except for brief periods during adolescence and certain mid-life crises -- it is safe to say that the Head is the command center of the body. It keeps all the organs, limbs, and systems that are embedded in or attached to the Torso working together and directed towards purposeful ends. Even when the heart or the leg appears to be acting entirely on its own, it is, in reality, being moved and managed by the Head. The Torso, on the other hand, is the larger part of the whole body, and the portion that works out the purposes of the Head. Hold on to this image because, as we're told at the start of today’s text: “Just as a [physical] body is... “so it is with [the spiritual body of] Christ” (1 Cor 12:12).

So, the FIRST idea I want to impart is that **to be the Body of Christ means that you are part of a community led by the ultimate Head.** At the point of your conversion or confession of faith, you said, in effect: “Look, I know I could try to run life by my own rules and instincts alone, but I’m not going to do that any more. As smart as I may be, I believe that Christ has much greater wisdom than I have. Therefore, I’m going to seek to respond to the direction of his Word and Spirit from now on. I’m going to seek to have Jesus Christ be the Head of my life.”

What is fascinating is that at the moment you made that individual commitment, assuming you have, you took a step towards a deeper experience of **community** life than is possible anywhere else. A. W. Tozer once put that truth in these words: “Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all
tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshipers (meeting) together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become 'unity' conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship."

I don’t know about you, but I’ve really found that to be true. Nothing creates a more lasting bond than a common membership in the Body of Christ. Put me in a room with nine pagan guys with whom I went to college and I’ll feel just fine. They dress like me and talk like me and But bring into that room one follower of Jesus from Nairobi and something else will happen. I may speak a different language from that tenth person, come from a different social background, be of a different race or gender, or share little other fleshly interest with that individual but -- because we have the same Head – I will feel a kinship with her or him that blows away a merely earthly sense of fellowship.

This same principle carries out to all areas of life. Nothing will so strengthen the bonds of intimate connection in a family, in a friendship, or in the life of a church as a common commitment to submitting to the Headship of Christ. Living in the midst of a world that is increasingly plagued by divisions and isolation, a world struggling to figure out how to heal the breaches that separate people one from another, this message is vital. One of the most significant contributions Christians can make in our culture today is to both model and share how genuine community can grow -- as individuals put their focus on the face of Jesus Christ, the great Head of the Body.

II

That is one glorious part of the unity of the Body of Christ. But there’s a SECOND remarkable dimension to it. Just as the Body of Christ has in Jesus a spiritual Head that directs its ways, so it also has in the Church a spiritual Torso. The Church is the awesome array of interconnected members that the Head uses to move through the world and exercise his will. For, as the Apostle Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 12:13, “we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body.” What Paul is getting at here is that to be a member of the Body of Christ means that you are part of a unique fellowship formed by the washing and the infilling of the Holy Spirit.

When you surrendered control of your life to the Headship of Christ you were literally washed clean by the Holy Spirit – God’s chemotherapy for sin. You and everyone around you who made that commitment suddenly became, in God’s eyes, cured of our fundamental disease. Oh, I grant you, our human eyes don’t fully appreciate this reality. We still see the stain of sin that appears to disfigure us and the superficial differences that seem to divide us. But if we could see one another the way God now sees us, we would weep for joy at the sheer
beauty and purity of the sight. We would greet each other not with the polite nods that sometimes pass for fellowship, but rather with all the mutual delight and gratitude that cancer survivors typically feel in the presence of one another. But there’s even more than that here. Paul tells us that “we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Cor 12:13). What this means is that, for the vast majority of us, at the moment we became believers, there began to course through the arteries of our souls nothing less than the power of Heaven. What had been before a spiritually anemic life began to become instead a dynamic new one, endowed with spiritual gifts – new supernatural capacities -- to serve the purposes of the Head.

III

Which brings us to talking about what the other side of the Body of Christ means. You see, as wonderful as the unity we have in Christ is, just as amazing are two insights that have to do with the **DIVERSITY** within the Body of Christ. In this regard, I appreciate the reflections of Ray Stedman, who once suggested that there are two dangerous tendencies in our thinking about spiritual gifts in the Body of Christ.

The first we might call **the myth of insignificance.** It is the crazy notion that what we might bring to the life of the Body is too small or unimportant when compared to the gifts of others to matter much at all. Oh, he or she truly matters in this church. But the Body doesn’t really need ME. I’m not part of that portion of the Body of Christ that really counts. But as the Apostle remind us: “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? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be... There are many parts, but one body.” (1 Cor 12:17-20)

You get the message, don’t you? Without diversity the body would be an organ instead of an organism. If all of us were preachers or administrators, where would that leave the Body? **You are desperately needed by the Body because your particular spiritual gifts are NOT just like everyone else’s.** You may feel unimportant sometimes because you see so many other members around you; but that is like the index finger thinking, “The Body doesn’t need me; look at all those other fingers.” Yet ask a concert pianist whether even that one finger is important. You are immensely significant to the functioning of the Body. God strategically placed you in the Church to fulfill a role that no one else can play in the same way.

That’s true of other people too. I’m reminded of the three men who were arguing over whose profession was most honored by God: “Go back to the beginning and you’ll see that mine was,” said the surgeon. “The Bible clearly says that Eve was made by carving a rib out of Adam.” “Yes, that’s all well and
good,” said the engineer, “but go back even further in Genesis and you’ll see that in six days the earth was created out of chaos. Why that’s obviously an engineering job.” “Yes,” said the politician, “but who do you think created the chaos?!”

If the myth of insignificance is one of the greatest dangers confronting us in the application of our gifts, then the myth of oversignificance is equally perilous. Many of us have bought into the lie that there is some kind of pecking order ordained by God, and that the way God has made me should put me up at the front of that order. But this is the fourth and last point I’ll make today: To be a member of the Body of Christ means I am deeply dependent upon and appreciative of others in the Body. As the Apostle Paul reminds us: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you’” (1 Cor 12:21).

In a memorable way, something of this truth was illustrated many years ago when then-President Reagan was shot by a would-be assassin. The news media erupted in anxiety over what the country would do if deprived of its national head. What I remember was that at about the same time, the New York garbage-collectors’ union went out on strike. Whose absence do you suppose created more true turmoil? The same is true in the Church. You would probably do just fine without me around here, but God forbid the people with the gift of helping or giving or faithful prayer don’t show up to fill the donut bowls; or the people with the gift of hospitality don’t arrive to set up the coffee; or the folks with the gift of teaching don’t come to care for our kids!

In 1 Corinthians 12:28, Paul supplies us with a list of different kinds of serving roles. Some people have read this catalogue as a hierarchy of gifts. It is not. It is simply a chronological list of the order in which gifts were given out at the start of the Church. In fact, Paul teaches that, if there is to be any disparity in the honor accorded to particular gifts, then it is the less publicly-acclaimed gifts -- such as helping or giving or faithful prayer -- that merit greater recognition (1 Cor 22:23). People with these gifts are the secret sinew that holds the Body together.

IV

A pastor I know tells of the time when one part of his physical body got injured and the whole rest of his body was so concerned that it sat up all night keeping that injured part company! Has that ever happened to you? Well, that’s the way it should be in the Church. The Apostle Paul says: “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (1 Cor 12:26). That’s why what happened in Charleston or is happening to the Church in too many others parts of this world are personal for you and me. As Christians, we are that dependent upon and appreciative of others in the Body.
One of my mentors, John Lavender, sums up the biblical message of Body life so beautifully that I’d like to close this series with his wise words. “Through spiritual gifts, God works in an incredible number of ways to produce that beautiful product which is Jesus ministering to the world through his Body. Why then should we insist on one standard brand of Christianity? On the Holy Spirit manifesting himself to us or someone else in a particular way? God is a God of magnificent variety. Forbid that we should ever again insist on uniformity in our worship and service. Let’s glory [instead] in the incredibly broad and exciting spectrum of good which the Holy Spirit can produce in the Church. Let’s praise God for our own uniqueness, of course, but let’s also praise God for the uniqueness of our brothers and sisters. Let’s praise him for the very differences we see -- and allow the diversity of gifts to affect how we relate to one another.

“You see, God has made us in such a way that our highest joy is not found by functioning in isolation, or by insisting that everybody else respond to life situations exactly as we do. Rather, our highest joy comes from learning how to relate to and support each other; how to give accent, significance, and distinction to each [reflection of God]. [For] when we look at each other [through God’s eyes], behind each face we will see the face of Jesus. And we will know that every [Christian], in ways that are right for him or her, is involved in the task of [helping us be] to the world what Jesus Christ would be if he were here himself.”

And, beloved, by the presence, and the advocacy, and the powerful gifts of the Holy Spirit at work in the Body, Jesus is here – the Head is acting out his will right now and in days to come, through you and me. To God be the glory. Amen.

**Summary Notes**

The UNITY of the Body of Christ means that you are...
Part of a community led by the ultimate Head
Part of a fellowship formed by the washing and infilling of the Holy Spirit

The DIVERSITY of the Body of Christ means that you are...
Desperately needed by the Body because of your particular spiritual gifts
Deeply dependent upon and appreciative of others in the Body