BODY IMAGE
Scripture: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13 and Ephesians 4:1-16

FOCUS: We are called to be a body of many different parts, bound together by one God for a common purpose as we live together in unity despite our diversity.

These days it seems everybody has the perfect program, guaranteed to enhance or recreate your body image, for a price. If Doctor Oz doesn’t have the answer for you surely Dr. Phil does. If the latest pill doesn’t work surely the most popular specialty supplement will. If the Adkins diet didn’t work out for you years ago try out some of the latest like the cabbage soup diet or the grapefruit diet, how about the apple cider vinegar diet? And why suffer all the pain of cosmetic surgery, if you want a facelift just smear on this cream. Did any of you see the small sign at the corner of Main Street and Culpepper last week? It said, lose 4 to 14 inches in an hour and gave a phone number. It didn’t say which inches, maybe it was a surgeon offering to cut a couple of inches off of each leg! We are hung up on body image and constantly told that if we are not, something is wrong.

In the passage we read from Ephesians Paul is hung up on body image as well. He is concerned about the image of the body of Christ, the church. Specifically he is concerned about growing disharmony in the church in Ephesus. Were he to check out the twenty-first century church in America he would have similar concerns I fear. The church in Ephesus was marked by great diversity. There were Jews and Gentiles, lifelong residents and newcomers, elder statesmen and young idealists. They were diverse, and that was a good thing, something even to be celebrated. But diversity alone is not enough. The church is called to be a vibrant example of unity within diversity. It was that unity part with which the folks in that ancient city were having a significant problem.

Paul’s focus throughout the letter to the Ephesians was the essential nature of unity. There had developed significant division, even animosity, between Gentile and Jew. Ironically it was the Gentiles who were becoming rather haughty, considering themselves superior to the Jewish Christians. Here were those adopted newcomers looking down their noses at those whose bloodline was that of God’s chosen people. Here were the descendants of those who just a single generation prior had been discriminated against and scorned as “those people”, but now they were guilty of the same kind of arrogance their parents had endured. How quickly things changed when fortunes were reversed. So it seems to always be. We are quick to decide we are the ones on the inside, to convince ourselves that we are the ones with all the right answers, with all the right lineage, with the inside track to God. And as we become arrogant and self-indulgent we do damage to the body of the very one we claim to serve, we begin to tear apart that which we are called to build up.

Unity, it seems to me that we hear a lot more about what divides us than about what ties us together these days. We seem to be more passionate about being Republicans or Democrats than about being tied together for the common good by our United States citizenship. We cheer those whose attitudes and ideals match ours and denigrate those with whom we disagree rather than facilitating meaningful discourse. After all it takes a lot more energy to rationally defend our positions while honestly listening to those whose ideas are not ours than it does to simply disparage folks.

One of my occasional typos is frighteningly ironic given what is going on in our denomination. I cannot tell you how many times “united” has come out untied, and of course spell check can’t save me from that one! You may know that there are those who are suggesting that it is time for the United Methodist church to split, a call for a sad reversal of the union which finally took place just 47 years ago. In 1968, after nearly two and a half centuries of division over such issues as slavery, the Methodist Church USA and the Evangelical United Brethren Church, came together to form the United Methodist Church. It was a great day for the ecumenical movement as each of the partner churches represented a combination of other denominations which had earlier united. As we continued to discuss cooperation with still more denominations it seemed that we were moving toward a fresh new day. The various parts of the body of Christ began to put aside that which divided and to concentrate on those fundamental and eternally important matters which unite us. But today I hear much chatter about division and little or none about unity.

This whole matter of denominations would be completely foreign to Jesus were he to walk among us, as would it be to Paul. To those living in the first century there was only Christianity, or as they called it early on, The Way. I kind of like that. The words of our text from Ephesians reflect what it is we are to be about as we seek to be on The Way. Beginning at verse 4 we read, ***“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.***  In The Message those important verses read, ***“You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly. You have one Master, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who rules over all, works through all and is present in all. Everything you are and think and do is permeated with Oneness.”***

Let’s look at the vision of unity Paul paints for us as he speaks of that which we who are the church ought to have in common. First he speaks of what we ought to be. We are called to be one body. In the twelfth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthian church he writes eloquently. As he defines Christian unity. Paul recognized an important and wonderful divine truth, that we can have unity without uniformity. I have talked about this before and I am sure I will talk about it again because it is so important and because it is something with which we all struggle. We are not, as Paul points out both here and in that Corinthian text, all called to be heads or feet or arms or legs. We each have unique gifts and talents which are given by grace for the health of the whole body. In 1 Corinthians Paul reminds us that if one part is not working effectively it affects other functions, it denigrates the health of the whole. We all know that when we have a splitting headache it affects everything. So it is when it comes to the body of Christ. It is our calling to so live that we simply do what we were created to do for the common good. And when we are not doing our part, when we do it poorly, we affect the whole body and become a drag on its function. Paul tells us that we are to be one body working together to project the image of the one whose name we claim.

Then Paul speaks of the unity within the Trinity. He declares that there is but on Spirit, and one Lord, one God and Father of us all. Our functions are to be distinct and uniquely ours as we do our part to enhance the body image of the church, the writer makes that clear. But equally as clear is the call to be directed in all that we are and all that we do by awe for our common Creator, by the example of a common Lord and by the unseen hand of a common Spirit. It is only as we look to God in God’s three persons for direction that we come to know what it truly means to be a vital part of the dynamic whole body.

Finally we read of matters of our spirit which ought to bind us together. We all share in one hope, one faith and one baptism. No matter what our station in life, rich or poor, black, brown or white, male or female, short or tall we all share a common source of eternal hope. We are bound together by that singular source of hope, and by our common faith in Jesus Christ who, through the Spirit, is the source of daily guidance and of our salvation. As we have been singing each Sunday for the past couple of months, “We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord.”

There is much we are called to hold in common, much oneness to which we are to aspire as we live out our lives as the body of Christ. But I want us to notice some of the things Paul doesn’t say. He doesn’t say there is one political party. He doesn’t say there is one interpretation of difficult passages of scripture. He doesn’t say there is one position on firearms and gun control, or on the Confederate flag or on immigration. He doesn’t say there is one acceptable style or one dress code for worship. He doesn’t say there is one way to be about sharing the gospel message. There are some of those issues on which I don’t agree with some of you. And you know what, that is O.K with me and that is O.K with God. But we can still be on the same road, headed in the same direction, with the same ultimate goal in mind, just driving slightly different vehicles.

I am pretty sure that Paul would tell us, were he here this morning, that it is about time those who truly seek to follow ***The Way*** of Christ recognize that we may be in danger of losing our way as we argue and spew forth venom and hatred instead of simply agreeably disagreeing on even controversial but not foundational issues. It isn’t wrong to have strong feelings, but it is sin to slander those with whom we disagree. It isn’t wrong to have passionate opinions concerning important matters. But it is a sin to gossip and spread false rumors concerning controversial matters. It isn’t wrong to be actively a part of the political process, we all ought to prayerfully be a part of it. But it is a sin to consistently trash those of opposing views with malicious half-truths or down right fabrications posted on social media sites.

The text we have read this morning begins with an important clue that Paul felt what was to come was particularly significant. Whenever Paul used the Greek word for therefore it was his subtle, if Paul ever was actually subtle, way of saying ok, listen up because what I am about to say is really important. What he says about unity, about body image, is important. It is a good thing to decide we want to improve our spiritual body image, but if we are going to work toward making it what it ought to be we need to know the nature of an appropriate image. Paul lays it out petty clearly. He begins by calling for us to live a life worthy of the calling which is ours. They he defines what that looks like, the body image we ought to set as our goal. We are called to live a life which is the antithesis of the life of bitterness and anger, the hallmarks of the divisive life style.

If this list of characteristics doesn’t intimidate you just a bit you have definitely attained sainthood. These are those troublesome characteristic we all know to be beneficial yet still have difficulty making permanent. To we who live in a world which champions swagger and self-confidence Paul says flavor your lives with humility and gentleness. To we who value instant gratification and fast food Paul says have a good dose of patience. To we who forward posts on social media which assassinate the characters of politicians, groups we dislike and people we find offensive, Paul say bear with one another in love. The writer then ties it all together with the call to make every effort possible to maintain the unity of the Spirit in a bond of peace.

That is a pretty tall order, one I fail to fulfill on a regular basis. But that is our calling, that is the image we ought to pursue. As those of us who have gone on diets know, despite what that sign said, you can’t reach you goal in an hour, or a day. And once you get there you must work to stay at your target weight. So it is with our spiritual bodies. It take time to develop those godly traits, and it is work to keep them in mind once we achieve them. But that is our calling.

You may have been wondering why we read that story about David. Well there is a reason. David had plenty of faults. He was at times arrogant, he could be manipulative, he was most of those things that are the antithesis of what Paul calls us to be. But when he was confronted by Nathan and forced to face his sin and guilt he did not make excuses, he didn’t try to blame Bathsheba for sunbathing where he could see her, he simply said, ***“I have sinned against the Lord.”*** I am convinced that the very first step we must take toward Christian unity with our sisters and brothers is to recognize our own failures and to confess them. As we seek to make the world a better place we need to start with ourselves. We may not be able to do much to solve the world’s problems. But we can make those changes which will freshen our body images, which will lead us to look more like the Master as we confess our brokenness and fall into the loving and grace filled arms of our loving God.

Our text ends with these words. ***“Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.*** Remember the closing line of that chorus we sang during fellowship moments. ***“And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”***

For you sake, for the sake of a bitter and divided world and for the sake of the kingdom of the one who can bind it together, let it be so. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.