

Body Parts

By Keith E Gatling

Sermon for January 21, 2001

Lessons for Epiphany 3 in Year C

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

First Corinthians 12, verses 12 through 31 is probably my favorite passage in the New Testament. Why? Because it's the passage that helped to free me from a place where I didn't belong, allowed me to find a place where I *did* belong, and allowed me to let others find the places where *they* belonged without insisting that it be the place that was right for me. And for that reason I think it's an excellent reading to be assigned for the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

I suppose a little explanation is in order.

1979 was, for all practical purposes, a pretty good year. I was in the third year of a great job at the SU library that let me take classes for free part-time. My classes were going well, but then it's easy to pull a 4.0 average when you're only taking two courses a semester and can do your reading on the job. I had just come back from a three week cross-country choir tour that took us to Disneyland. And - my social life was beginning to look a little better. All in all, a great time to turn my life over to God.

"Huh?" you say. "What is this guy talking about? This doesn't sound like the Keith we know. What's going on here?"

OK, a little more explanation. As far back as I can remember I've always been interested in religion - reading everything I could on what made one denomination different from another, and asking questions about what got changed in the transition from Judaism to Christianity. I've pretty much always believed, but as you know me now, I was one of those quiet, questioning believers.

And yet, in the 70s, through my many involvements with Hendricks Chapel at SU, I became aware of a different type of Christian that seemed to be a little more intense than what I was used to. They seemed to have a definite purpose to their lives, and this was shaped by their deciding to "turn their lives over to God."

Well this seemed interesting, so I asked questions and got some answers, which led to more questions and more answers. This turning over your life to God thing didn't seem like such a bad idea except for one thing - my life was pretty much a disaster at the time.

I was lonely, I was depressed, I was just totally messed up - and I didn't want to turn my life over to God as a way of getting a "quick fix." It didn't seem quite fair to God to only go to him when I was in trouble. No, I had made up my mind that for it to be real

and fair, I had to wait until my life didn't seem like such a mess.

And so, in 1979, with everything going well, and having met some more of this "different type of Christian" that I could ask more questions of and get answers from, I decided that this was finally the right time to do it. I turned my life over to God, joined up with a group of these people on campus, and everything was wonderful.

For about two weeks. Then that brain of mine started to kick in, and there were problems. That brain of mine that had been asking questions for 20 odd years before, had new questions about some of the things I was hearing and seeing from these people. Questions about things I couldn't make sense of, but questions I didn't feel comfortable either asking or having in the first place. Why? Because to them having these questions meant that I didn't really believe, and that I was going straight to Hell.

Part of me said that staying with this group and trying to force myself to accept everything they taught was an express ticket to a padded room, but another part of me said that at least I wouldn't be going to Hell. There was a horrible conflict going on in my head over contradictions I couldn't allow myself to admit existed. There was inner conflict over them saying that people who weren't part of their group weren't real Christians. And yet, I was afraid to bail because I figured it meant consigning myself to Hell.

This wasn't lost on my roommates, who saw what was going on, saw the change in the Keith they'd known for years, and tried to reason with me to "deprogram" me. But there was still that terror in my mind that

saying, "I can't do this," would mean that I was buying my own ticket to Hell.

And then I heard it. Not from my roommates, but in one of the many Bible study sessions I went to that summer with these people. I heard First Corinthians 12, verses 12 through 31, and the door opened up for me to leave with my mind and soul intact.

For the body is one and has many members...if the whole body were an eye, how would it smell?

Whoa! There were many types of Christians. Some more emotional than others. Some more logical than others. Some with more rules, some with fewer. Some who include and some who exclude. Some who discourage questions, some who tolerate them, and some who actively encourage them. Some who can deal with the messy grey areas of life, and some who need things in black and white. But the important thing is that they are all Christians, and they are all part of the body of Christ.

For if the church were all emotion, who would say, "Excuse me, but this doesn't logically follow"? And if the church were all freedom and forgiveness, who would say, "You need to be called to account for this"?

Hearing these words opened the door for me to see that as these people were Christians, so was I before - I was just a different part of the body. I was thinking that because I wasn't a mouth, I didn't count. What I didn't realize was that I was some other equally important body part. I was now free to go find other similar body parts.

Yes, the Body of Christ is made up of many parts that perform many different functions for the many different people who need to be reached in different ways, and who respond to different things. It's also important to note that in a regular body the different parts don't act independently, but depend on each other for input as to what to do next. The hand does not often act without input from the eye, and as we know from watching Katie Pavlacka, sometimes the hand *is* the eye.

But what does this have to do with us here today? I know that we often kid about some of our Roman Catholic and Missouri Synod friends who seem to think that their church is the only true expression of Christianity, but let's face it, there's a lot of that here that we don't own up to.

There are probably quite a few of us here who can't believe some of the things the Baptists do and teach. What kind of person would go for that stuff? Where on earth do they come up with that stuff about playing cards and dancing being sinful? Well yeah, they're Christians, but still... And what about those Methodists. And please, let's not even mention the Episcopalians right now. Those of us who found a good fit here with the Lutherans tend to think that our way is the best way - the *right* way - to do things, and look at any other interpretation of Christianity with just a little suspicion.

We look at other expressions of Christianity that don't particularly suit us, and assume that there's something wrong with the people that it works for, assuming that once they grow a little they'll want to become more like us.

And it doesn't even end there. We have our differences within this particular part of the body. There's even a right way to be a Lutheran. How many times have we each either said or heard, "The way we did things back in my old church in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Minnesota - whatever - is the way it should be done"? We talk about "entertainment evangelism" as being terrible because it's not something that *we* need, and expect everyone to be reached by the same methods and music that reached us. We talk about "reaching out without dumbing down" assuming that everyone has to an amateur theologian and understand all the \$10 theological terms in order to be a real Christian.

For if the whole body were an eye,
how would it smell?

Many people have bemoaned the fact that we don't seem to be as "brand loyal" when it comes to denominations as we used to be. Many people these days tend to think that for the most part, once you weed out all the wing nut groups, a church is a church is a church, and that theological differences aren't as important as worship style, good preaching, and - parking.

I think this is a good thing because once again it shows that people are looking at the Body of Christ as a whole instead of focusing on their one particular body part.

We spend way too much time keeping score of which denominations are gaining and which ones are losing, often aghast at who's gaining and distressed at who's losing. But I think that this is a matter of turf guarding that ignores one important thing - how is Christianity faring on the whole? If my

denomination is losing, but Christianity is gaining, isn't that still a good thing?

For if the whole Church were Lutheran, where would those gifts be that the Presbyterians bring to us. And if the whole Church were Roman Catholic, where would be those gifts that come to us from the Pentecostals?

First Corinthians 12, verses 12 through 31 freed me to leave a place where I didn't fit to find one where I did, without necessarily putting down the people who *did* fit in the

place that I didn't belong or assuming that they needed to be where *I* was. I hope that it frees you to find your best fit, wherever it may take you, and to not assume that what fits you best is what's best for everyone else.

The Body of Christ has many different parts that reach out to different people in the ways in which they need to be reached out to.

This is most certainly true.