**Have the same care for one another**

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:25

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Leviticus 19:15-18; 1 Corinthians 12; James 2:1-13

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 211, 374, 73b, 502, 103

**Series:** The ‘one anothers’ of Scripture (#10)

**Theme:** The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth, which was threatened by internal division, and compares the diversity of a single human body to the variety of members in the church - all of whom have been combined by God into one whole so that there may be no division in the body of Christ, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

**Proposition:** Brothers and sisters in Christ, have the same care for one another that there may be no divisions in the church.

**Introduction**

I’d like to begin by telling you a silly story. It’s about a human body in which the different parts can communicate with one another with words. One day the toes were having a conversation about the importance of wearing shoes both for protection and comfort when walking. These lower digits had noticed that other parts of the body were not in the habit of putting on footwear. So they decided to try and convince the other members of the body about the obvious benefits of shoes, boots and jandals. No matter how hard they tried, the rest of the body just couldn’t see the point of shoe wearing for themselves. This was outside the realm of their personal experience so they couldn’t understand the perspective of the toes. This stirred up quite a debate. The legs argued that trousers were the only appropriate clothing for the body. Not surprisingly, the torso was adamant that shirts were the only way to go. The hands were generally in favour of no clothing, although they did concede that on cold days gloves were useful. The result was a bitter quarrel amongst the various body parts. In the end the members of this body decided to separate from one another. The result, not surprisingly, was that the whole body died. Dismemberment – separating a body into pieces - is fatal.

Here is a more serious story which I have made up, but which is similar in detail to some real events. One day a person stepped on a rusty nail which went through their shoe into their big toe. After removing the nail, the person resolutely ignored the pain from the wound. Over the next few days the foot and ankle began to swell, but the rest of the body took no notice. Then the skin started to turn a purply colour and lines could be seen tracking up the leg. As the bacteria clostridium tetani spread through the body, the muscles began to stiffen around the jaw, neck, back, chest, abdomen and limbs. The temperature of the whole body rose, and the skin began sweating profusely. The whole person became very sick, was admitted to hospital for treatment, but could not be cured and died of tetanus.

Finally, a third story, broadly based on a report given at our recent online synod. There was a church in Australia worshipping together during the COVID pandemic. Some members were for wearing masks in worship and some were not. The mask-wearers felt intimidated by the non-mask wearers. The non-mask wearers chose to sing extra loudly to show off their ‘freedom’. Conversations between the masked and the unmasked became aggressive, unloving, unsympathetic and so sowed the seeds of deep disharmony, mistrust and division. In the end that congregation split up and no longer worship together as a church. That local body of Christ has died.

As the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth, he is greatly concerned about the potential for disagreements in the congregation resulting in division. In our text, the Holy Spirit, who inspired Paul to write this letter, explains about the church that “*God has so composed the body, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another*” (1 Cor 12:24b-25). We are going to look at this ‘one another command’ - to have the same care for one another - under three headings:

1. One body with many parts
2. The danger of division
3. The same care for one another
4. **One body with many parts**

The church in Corinth to which Paul wrote was clearly a very messy congregation. Within this young church there was sexual immorality, legal proceedings against one another, divorce, idolatry, and a lack of concern by those in the congregation for each other. It is against this background that the Apostle Paul writes a pastoral letter about the practicalities of church life and uses the powerful analogy of the human body. Listen to 12:12 “*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*”.

Given all the difficulties, imperfections and sinful behaviour in the church at Corinth you might expect the Apostle to explain that they **should be** the body of Christ, but have fallen far short. Or maybe that one day they **could be** the body of Christ if they just tried a bit harder to get along with each other. Or perhaps that they **will be** the body of Christ once they are made perfect when Christ returns.

The truth was for the ‘church of God that is in Corinth’ and also for the ‘Reformed Church of Christchurch who meet on Cornwall Street’ that “***Now, you are*** *the body of Christ and individually members of it*” (12:27). Brothers and sisters, God declares that **we are** the body of Christ now! We are a living spiritual organism made up of many different parts who together form one whole body. The composition of this congregation may seem a bit odd. Some people have grown up in this church, whilst others have joined in recent years. We have a wide range of backgrounds, diverse ethnicities, and different perspectives on many topics. There is a wide range of ages represented in this congregation from very young children, some yet to be born, through to those of advanced years.

The Holy Scriptures teach us that we, as a local church, have been ‘composed’ by God (v24). The Greek word here means to mix or blend together. It was used in the ancient world for the mixing of wine with water and spices. This word ‘composed’ conveys the idea of being combined together to form a whole. Just as the human body has been carefully and intricately designed by the Creator (Ps 139:14) so the church, as a local body of believers has been carefully and intricately combined together to form a whole; one body with many different parts. Brothers and sisters, you are not part of this church by accident, you are here according to ‘*the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will*’ (Eph 1:11).

At the beginning of chapter 12, the Apostle Paul describes different spiritual gifts given to individual people within the church – manifestations of the Holy Spirit for the common good (12:7). Just like different parts of a human body, each one of us is different and we are gifted to perform different functions within the church. Some roles like mine are more visible, others like that of those who prepare the PowerPoint slides, pay the bills to keep this facility operating, or who regularly take time to visit and encourage the lonely and downhearted at home are not so obvious. Whoever you and I are, whatever ways we serve in the church, we have each been ‘arranged’ in the body as God choses (12:18). Each of us is important to the health and vitality of this church. We have been joined together by Christ as interconnected parts of a whole.

Perhaps you’ve experienced how much a small, infected wound in your body can affect your whole being. I’ve been in some pain for the last few weeks due to a nerve issue with one of my teeth. It amazes me just how much my whole body has been affected by a small part of one molar in the back of my mouth. Now the pain is receding and my whole body feels better. Paul writes of the church “*If one member suffers, all suffer together, if one member is honoured, all rejoice together*”. The health of the whole body depends on the wellbeing of all the members, which brings us to our second point:

1. **The danger of division**

You may have heard recent reports in the news describing an epidemic in New Zealand. No, not Covid-19! But type 2 diabetes. This currently affects 225,000 people and is projected to more than double within the next twenty years. Type 2 diabetes affects many parts of the body and often results in frequent infections and in some cases the need to amputate limbs. We could say that Type 2 diabetes can be responsible for dividing the body. When a limb is removed, patients often experience what is called ‘phantom pain’ where the body suffers not only the disability of not having a foot, a hand, an arm or a leg but also endures agony as a result of the departure of a member that is no longer there. Division of our physical bodies is painful and debilitating. When some parts are separated from our bodies we can no longer live.

Just as splitting off body parts is dangerous and potentially fatal, so division in the church damages Christ’s bride and puts the whole body at risk. This was the situation in the church at Corinth when Paul wrote this first letter to them. There were different factions in the congregation. Some people followed the Apostle Paul. After all he was the one who planted the church (Acts 18:1-11). We could call this group the ‘loyalists’. Then there were those who were enthralled with the preaching style of Apollos, a gifted orator from Alexandria. Today this group could be those who would prefer to listen to gifted preachers on T.V. or online rather than attend their local church and hear their very ordinary pastor speak. Some preferred Peter, referring to him by his Aramaic name Cephas. Wasn’t Peter really the one who kicked off the spread of the gospel with his sermon on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem? We could call this group the ‘traditionalists’. Today this group could be those who want the church practices to be exactly like they were at the time of the Protestant Reformation in the Netherlands. Others perhaps saw themselves as above these petty squabbles over different preachers and piously declared that they followed Christ alone.

It is clear from Paul’s letter that there was jealousy and strife in the Corinthian congregation (1 Cor 3:3). When the church gathered together for shared meals during which Lord’s Supper was celebrated, the materially wealthy did not share with the less fortunate and so some went hungry (1 Cor 10:21). Some were very good at looking after their own interests, but did not care for the interests of others who were different to them (cf. Phil 2:4). It also seems that the Corinthians elevated the gift of speaking in tongues above other spiritual gifts (12:1-11, 13:1). There were two particular dangers which threatened the health of the body of Christ in Corinth.

**Firstly**, those who thought that they were unimportant, unnecessary and inferior parts of the church. This is the danger of thinking that you are a lesser part of the body. Imagine, as Paul does, your foot saying "because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body" or your ears feeling like they don’t belong like your eyes do. It sounds silly, but that’s how people in a church like ours can speak or feel. Brothers and sisters, we are all equally important! (ref. Gal 3:28), precious in the sight of God (1 Pet 2:4). There is no partiality with God (Rom 2:11; Gal 2:6). God has arranged each one of us, as he chose. He does not make mistakes! We all belong, despite how we might feel at times!

**Secondly**, some people in the Corinthian church thought that they were more important than others. Imagine, as Paul does, your eyes saying to your hands “I have no need of you” or your head saying the same thing to your feet. There are parts of our bodies which we keep covered – we rightly don’t display them in public! Yet, they are important parts of our bodies. You would be in trouble without them! Do you know where the smallest bone is found in your body? The ‘stapes’ bone is shaped like a stirrup and is moved by the smallest skeletal muscle in the body; called the stapedius muscle. These are very small parts of you, and yet without them you could not hear me speaking now.

The point which the Apostle Paul was making to the church in Corinth and which the Holy Spirit is making to us now is that whilst the body is composed of different parts, we are not to be divided from each other. We all need one another. We are not to divide from the body because we feel we are less important than others. Neither are we to divide from the body because we feel we are more important than others. We are also not to divide from the body because we are different from the other members

As we were reminded earlier, God calls us not to show partiality; favouring some people over others (James 2:1-9). The Bible is clear that this is sin, just as much as adultery and murder are sin (James 2:11). Brothers and sisters, we must not look down on others, whilst favouring those who hold views like our own. In the context of the COVID pandemic; we must not favour those who wear-masks over those who do not. We must not favour those who have chosen to be vaccinated over those who have not. We must not favour those who are concerned about becoming infected with Covid-19 over those who are not concerned. We must not favour those who support particular decisions our civil government makes over those who do not.

It is not the virus itself which presents the danger of division to us as a local church body, but rather the sinful tendency we all have to favour some people over others thereby committing the sin of partiality. What then is the antidote, the medicine, which is needed in the body that there be no division? The answer from God’s Word is ‘*that the members of the body have the same care for one another*’, which brings us to our third point:

1. **The same care for one another**

It’s obvious to me from my conversations with many of you that we do not all agree on many things. At the moment, it’s hard not to think of the examples of mask-wearing, vaccinations, and our government’s covid response. These are some of the ‘hot topics’ of conversation today. Brothers and sisters, the Lord does not call us to agree on everything! Jesus said, "*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*" (John 8:31-32). We can have liberty of conscience on many matters upon which the Scriptures do not constrain us.

You might say to me, well what about 1 Corinthians 1:10? This verse reads “*I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment*”. Here Paul is not exhorting the church to agree about everything. The context reveals that they are to have the same opinion about the central importance of the gospel (1:18-3:23). The ‘same mind’ which we are called to have, is the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16). This is the same heart, motivation, attitude of Jesus, the one who calls us to love one another: just as He has loved us (John 13:34).

We are to agree without division or dissent that to love one another is to:

* Bear one another’s burdens (Gal 6:2)
* Be kind to one another (Eph 4:32)
* Encourage one another (1 Thess 5:11)
* Accept one another (Rom 15:7)
* Submit to one another (Eph 5:21)
* Bear with and forgive one another (Col 3:13)
* Show hospitality to one another (1 Pet 4:9)
* Teach and admonish one another (Col 3:16) and also from our text:
* Have the same care for one another.

The Greek word translated ‘care’ here is used in a negative sense and translated ‘anxiety’ elsewhere. For example Paul writes earlier in this letter “*I want you to be free from anxieties*” (1 Cor 7:32). Here in 1 Cor 12:25 it is used in the positive sense of care or concern for another person. So how do you have the same concern for diverse kinds of people with different opinions, ideas and perspectives?

**Firstly**, by being careful to care for all your brothers and sisters in Christ here with the **same concern**. This means not caring for family members more than others. This means not caring for people with a similar background to you more than others. This means not caring for the young more than the old or vice versa. This means not caring for those who share your views about certain matters more than those who have different opinions from yours.

Now clearly there are limits to how much care we can have for different people in our congregation as we serve one another. We are constrained by time. There are only about 16 waking hours per day. However, within any week or month we should be mindful of extending our care for one another to all kinds of people, not just a particular group whom we favour over others.

Partiality for people who are like us comes naturally to fallen human beings. Christ, the perfect man, showed no favouritism. He ministered to the rich, the poor, the ‘in-crowd’ and the outcasts. He cared for Jews and Gentiles. “*He is the image of the invisible God*” (Col 1:15) and “*God shows no partiality*” (Rom 2:11). "*For God so loved the world (that is all different kinds of people), that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16).

How do you have the same concern for diverse kinds of people with different opinions, ideas and perspectives?

**Secondly**, by seeking to understand the anxieties of others so that you know what they are most concerned about and why. Then you can ‘put yourself in their shoes’ by making the effort to imagine what it is like to be in their situation with their own particular concerns and cares, strengths and weaknesses. This is not so that you can judge or condemn them, but so that you can have the same care for them as you have for someone who is more like you.

Some of us in our congregation are very concerned about being infected with Covid-19. We know that the virus is heading our way and that it is likely only a matter of time before it is widespread in our Christchurch community. Some of us in our congregation are very concerned about the Pfizer vaccine, the speed of its development, the relatively new mRNA technology used, and/or the possible and actual side effects. We prefer to wait for Novavax (a protein subunit vaccine, not a mRNA vaccine) which is currently awaiting approval in a number of countries). Some of us in our congregation are very concerned about the implementation of ‘vaccine certificates’ currently only valid for 6 months. We care deeply about the direction our NZ Government is taking with mandates and are concerned about even greater restrictions in the future. Some of us in our congregation are very concerned about the increased risk of transmission of the virus from those who have chosen not to be vaccinated. Some of us are anxious about what people may think of us if we chose not to wear facemasks in church, or if we have a health condition which prevents us from doing so. Some of us are very concerned about the proposed ‘Protection Framework’ ‘traffic light system’ and the effect that this may have on the gathering together of churches that will not, on Biblical principle, show partiality to the vaccinated over the unvaccinated. These are just some of our differences.

I am thankful to the Lord that He reveals to us the way to prevent damaging division in this local body of Christ – that we have the same care for one another. Today, hear the Word of the Lord and know that God has so composed this church body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. Now (brothers and sisters) you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. Each one of us is equally important for the health of this body.

AMEN.