

Reflections, February 2019

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A few weeks ago, at Tawa Union Church we heard a sermon based on 1 Corinthians 12:12-31: the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ. For many of us this is a well-known text, sandwiched between teachings on spiritual gifts and love. The freshness of The Message's translation, though, brought the words alive as we had the entire passage read aloud to us.

There are many important messages for us in these verses. Here are a few of them as I see it.

Firstly, we are all part of Christ's body, irrespective of the many labels we place on ourselves and others; there are no Lone Rangers. And amid this community of faith, we're called to submit ourselves to Christ.

"Your body has many parts—limbs, organs, cells—but no matter how many parts you can name, you're still one body. It's exactly the same with Christ. By means of his one Spirit, we all said goodbye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which he has the final say in everything... The old labels we once used to identify ourselves... are no longer useful. We need something larger, more comprehensive."

1 Corinthians 12: 12-13 (The Message)

Secondly, if we are to function effectively as the body of Christ then we need to make way for each other. There is no reason to feel inferior, nor is there any reason to feel superior:

"...If Ear said, 'I'm not beautiful like Eye, limpid and expressive; I don't deserve a place on the head,' would you want to remove it from the body? If the body was all eye, how could it hear? If all ear, how could it smell? As it is, we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it... I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a part of."

1 Corinthians 12: 16-21 (The Message)

No one has a monopoly on the truth, or the words of God. If we want to hear what the Spirit is saying, then not only should we be reading the Scriptures; but we need to pay close attention to each other, particularly when it feels like hard work.

No one has a monopoly on leadership and its attributes; everyone has something to bring to the conversation. Leadership is, above all things, contextual: in one setting, one person's skills and knowledge are needed but, in another setting, these count for very little and someone else steps up. In the church, and in the world, many of us seem to have views about leadership that are based on titles and hierarchies, but no one person embodies all the qualities and capabilities that are needed in each and every situation.

Thirdly, we see what happens when we ignore, disregard or simply forget the reality of being part of the body of Christ: things get out of kilter and our life together suffers as a result. Going back to that leadership thing again, the business world has found out the hard way what happens when you over-emphasise the individual at the expense of the group. So, I think, have we:

“There is far too much focus on individual characteristics of leadership and far too little focus on the situational context. By placing too much emphasis on the individual, we can easily fall prey to the cult of the CEO and believe that any individual who was successful in one setting would naturally be successful in a new setting. The list of once-successful CEOs who have failed in new business settings is long.”

(Mayo, 2007)¹

In front of each other, as well as a watching world, let's re-read Paul's words to the church at Corinth, praying for the grace and humility to explore what it truly means to be part of the body of Christ.

In light of all this, here's what I want you to do. While I'm locked up here, a prisoner for the Master, I want you to get out there and walk—better yet, run!—on the road God called you to travel. I don't want any of you sitting around on your hands. I don't want anyone strolling off, down some path that goes nowhere. And mark that you do this with humility and discipline—not in fits and starts, but steadily, pouring yourselves out for each other in acts of love, alert at noticing differences and quick at mending fences. 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.

Ephesians 4:1-6 (The Message)

Questions for reflection

- God is blind to the labels we place on ourselves and each other. Why do they matter so much to us?
- There are several practical consequences of this picture of the church as the body of Christ: mutual dependence (vv. 14–20), unity (v. 25) and sympathy with one another (v. 26) to name a few. How should we give these practical consequences the emphasis they deserve?
- Why does diversity in the body of Christ tend to be stifled? Instead, how can we harness that diversity?

¹ Mayo, T. (2007): Context-based leadership. <https://hbr.org/2007/07/contextbased-leadership-1>