

**"Mosaic, Window, Table"**

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

October 1, 2017

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

Saint Paul, Minnesota

The Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Let us pray.

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, prepare our hearts to hear your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that in hearing, we may obey your will through Jesus Christ our Lord.

As I mentioned in the time for children, I really like marathon weekend here. I could do without the road closures, especially this year, and wish that they'd do some of it on Saturday so I can cheer on friends who are running the ten mile, but I really do like going out after church to see the runners – and the wheelers before church. And I especially like seeing all those who are out to cheer on the runners. Many of them are there to cheer on friends and family members – sometimes even picking up and moving a half-dozen times throughout the morning to cheer on throughout the race. But some are there to just cheer people on.

There is something profoundly meaningful about that. In a culture obsessed with winning and losing, here are all these people cheering on athletes, but not to win or lose, but to simply cheer, to celebrate, to encourage.

I would be glad to move on from metaphors of winning and losing. They have taken over our culture. I supposed that the President was correct when he said as a candidate that we would be soon be tired of winning. I am tired of winning, if only as a metaphor. A world of who's up and who's down, of news reports and 24 hour media that covers policy and governance like a horserace. That covers economics like a horserace. That covers culture in terms of winners and losers. That turns so many of our tv shows into the realm of winning and losing. That turns even the coverage of natural disasters into winning and losing. I am tired of it, and it's everywhere now.

I know that there is a usefulness to winning and losing as a metaphor. I don't know who will win the Twins playoff game on Tuesday. I do know that I will be very happy if the Twins win. I do know that I will be sad if they lose. The high of winning is intoxicating, especially when tribally organize ourselves – if they win, I will probably say that we won, and gloat that over the Yankees as if I was part of it. The low of losing is regrettable, can be a spur to improvement – but it may well be that we didn't lose – they lost, as I want to distance myself from the loser. There is truth in the metaphor, but it is such an overused, thin and simple and tired metaphor.

That tribal appeal – to divide ourselves up, to treat the whole of life as a series of competitions, to treat the whole country, world as competitors allied in whichever way yields an interesting story about who's up and who's down. It is too much.

Too easy to name losers. Too easy to puff ourselves up as winners. Too easy to divide into winners and losers, judgement passed, onto the next competition. The next election. The next earnings report. The next contest. And we end up with a rhetoric, a conversation solely about winners and losers. And that is sad, to create losers. To create division. To create a competition out of our votes, our culture, our economy, our lives. To distance ourselves from each other, to cut off the losers.

It's a different feeling with the marathon – there are winners, I know, but the crowd out there is not here to cheer on winners and denigrate losers. Their cheering represents compassion at its finest – to see the

individual who looks like they're struggling and to tell them to go, go, go! To see someone here at mile 24 and a half, a mile from the finish, and to say "you can do it." Neighbors come out from the houses that line the street, forming the crowd by cheering together with neighbor. All of these volunteers at the water tables, filling Christ's commands to give water to those who are thirsty.

And then especially to see strangers encourage people who have added their names to their shirts somewhere – to be able to call someone by name and tell them to just keep running. The runners and the cheerers, the volunteers handing out water and the family members holding up signs for their loved ones. And to dive in and cheer ourselves, to clap and whistle and play the bagpipes.

And, as I mentioned in the time for children, there a natural connection here between the runner and the passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. From friends who've run marathons, there's an appeal to testing the body to its limits, to finding out that we can do something beyond our imagining. To come to greater embodied awareness, to know who we are through learning how we are knit together. The whole body pulling together, the hand and foot and eye and ear and head, united in one body, working toward a common goal.

For Paul's audience, this body imagery would have been familiar, but Paul subverts and changes it. In the ancient world, appeals to the body as a metaphor for the society would have been common in speeches about social harmony. Usually, it would have been used to "urge members of the subordinate classes to stay in their places and not upset the natural equilibrium of the body by rebelling against their superiors."<sup>i</sup> Instead of this, Paul uses this metaphor to speak about diversity and interdependence.

Paul writes that the body does not consist of one member, but many; indeed, if the whole body were an eye, or an ear, it would cease to be the body.

Paul writes that we cannot divide. We cannot separate. We are interdependent, reliant on the whole, called by God to be the whole body. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'"

We cannot divide, and we cannot separate. Words for today. We cannot say to Puerto Rico today "I have no need of you." We cannot say to hurricane victims "I have no need of you." - I can do this all day in our national and international dialogue. - We cannot turn to our black and brown brothers and sisters and say "I have no need of you." We have brothers and sisters in Christ around the world today who celebrate World Communion Sunday.

Beyond the reach of Christianity, all people are fellow children of God. And we cannot say to them "I have no need of you." We cannot say to refugees from Syria "I have no need of you." We cannot say to the people of North Korea "I have no need of you." This is easy for me to say.

So still further: We somehow, cannot say to those we disagree with "I have no need of you." We cannot say to the people that try to divide us "I have no need of you." We cannot turn to the people that we have been tribally split from, that have been vilified, that have been demonized, that have been other-ized and ostracized, we cannot turn to them and say "I have no need of you."

And yet, when our only metaphor, when our dominant metaphor, is winning and losing, we get encouraged to turn neighbors into opponents. To call them losers. Or to figure out if they're winning over us, and how to take them down. We get permission to cut the losers off, to dismember the body. We are engaged in a culture of cutting off our nose to spite our face.

Today's text reminds us - if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. And - For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks,

slaves or free. One body. Not Jew vs. Greek, slave vs. free. Not winning and losing. And so we need to expand our metaphors.

Listen then, to all of these metaphors.

On Rally Sunday, our fifth and sixth graders handed out post-it notes, and people came up and added their colored post-it to the board, like a paint by number. Light gray here, blue over here, green in the corner – and together as a congregation we made a picture of the church, post-it by post-it, each adding one section, one pixel, one little three inch square, to make a mosaic, a mural almost six feet high and long. All of us, each with our post-it, pitching in a little to come together to make up the church.

The stained glass windows here in our sanctuary. Each is made of hundreds of pieces of glass. All different shapes, all different colors. Each piece on their own looks misshaped or broken, accidental and incomplete. Joined together like a puzzle, they dazzle. Joined together in array, each with their own shape and color, come together to form the whole.

The painting of Georges Seurat, the pointillist painter. Knew that dots of color could come together in amazing ways in our vision, so that a field of green grass might be made up of dots of purple and orange as well as greens and blues. The purple and orange may not seem like they belong, but they are what makes it true, what makes it shine, so that a monumental canvas, the size of a wall, could be made of millions of dabs of color, joined together to give an ethereal light.

These metaphors tell us something different about what it means to come together. Coming together does not consist in like-mindedness, in tribally aligning ourselves so that we all enjoy the same pastimes, cheer the same politicians, demean the same shortcomings in others. These metaphors show that there is power in diversity. Paul's ludicrous image of a body that was all eye. It just as well could have been the stained-glass that was all clear, all squares. These metaphors show that there is power in interdependence – that if one part of the body suffers, we all suffer.

We all suffer when you are told your neighbor is a loser. When you believe your neighbor is a loser. When you are told that we are separate teams. Red and blue, or America and the world, or kneel and stand, or black and white. When you cast the world into the sharp relief of winning and losing, remember these metaphors. Remember that we come together through our diversity, that we depend on one another. That if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

And here is one more set of metaphors. The table, the bread, the cup. A loaf – baked from all the ingredients come together. The cup that is shared. The table, to which all are invited. The meal which is Christ's body, given freely to us all for the forgiveness of our sins. It is at this table that we become again the body of Christ, and individually members of it. It is at this table that the community of God's people is fully manifested, today with those around the globe, and always, at all times, a reminder of the oneness with all the church in every time and place. Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> *First Corinthians: Interpretation Bible Commentary*, Richard B. Hays, 1997.