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1 Corinthians 12:12-31 (NRSV)

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. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one 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.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect;

whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

We live in a world of divisions. These divisions play themselves out around us wherever we turn.

Democrat vs. Republican. Conservative vs. Liberal. MSNBC vs. Fox News. Apple vs. Android. Chevy vs. Ford. Michigan vs. Michigan State. The Civilized West vs. Terrorism. Christianity vs. Islam. The Patriots vs. teams that follow the rules. Associate Pastors vs. Senior Pastors.

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And regardless of the seriousness of these divisions, the loudest voices on either side make it seem as though these divisions reflect matters of life and death. Choose correctly or be labelled: un-American, heathen, traitor, loser, capitulator, not-serious, no-longer-welcome, outcast.

We live in a world of divisions.

And we also live in a world of rank and order. Our brains constantly work to assess where we rank in relation to those we encounter. Are our clothes nicer? Is our skin lighter? Is our wallet fuller? Are we taller? Skinnier? Prettier? Funnier? Younger? Older? More educated? Do we drive a nicer car? Have a bigger house? A more prestigious job title? Does our last name have more history around here? Do we speak crisper English? Use more modern slang? Is our church bigger than theirs? Do we have better friends?

We rank and order those we encounter and then assign value judgments based on them. Are they poorer than me? They must be lazier and less intelligent. Are they richer? They must be smarter and more talented. Do they have a funny accent? Well, my vocal pattern is how the world should speak, there must be something problematic about them. Are their clothes a little tattered? They're certainly not as cool or worthy of friendship. Is their church bigger? They must be doing things more like how God wants them to be done. Is their church smaller? They really need to get on board with how God wants things done. Are they Muslim? They must be a terrorist or at the very-least, working outside of "normal" American values.

We divide and we rank and order. We retreat into our own camps, surrounding ourselves with people that think and look and act just like us. We read what we want to hear and watch what we want to see. We listen to voices that sound like ours and we stop up our ears if things start to challenge us.

On some level, it makes sense that we do this. Surely it's part of human nature. And it's also part of our larger culture. Our leaders paint the other side as suspect, evil, dishonest, and arguably demonic. Advertising works to convince us that a new product or service will raise our social standing, put us another rung higher on the ladder. Corporate and athletic culture tell us that unless you're first, you're last. Being a middle schooler is a three year exercise in trying to prove yourself over and against every other middle schooler everywhere. Nationalism works to convince us that we're better than others simply by virtue of where we're born. The internet is full of lists, the 6 best this, the 10 worst that. Church leaders take the size of a congregation as a sign of God's blessing and act as though their church must be more important and doing it better.

We're constantly bombarded by these divisions and ranks, so it's no surprise it becomes part of how we think. If constantly do something, eventually it becomes

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habitual and begins to seem normal. If we see division and rank everywhere we look, we think by dividing and ranking.

And here comes Paul to turn the whole system on its head.

You think that being an eye is the only way to be?! Well then...tell me, what would the body be if it were entirely an eye? How would you get anywhere without feet? What if you had a scratch? You going to use those hands you don't have to itch it?

And you think that those who are deemed strong deserve more respect and honor? Not here! Here the weaker are indispensable and the less respectable, deserve more respect!

And why can Paul say all this? Because "God has arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose" and "God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member." **It's how God created and ordered us to be.**

Ideas like this have been central to Paul's argument throughout his letter to the Corinthians. The cross is foolish and yet wiser than all the world's wisdom.

The culture in Corinth peddles in sex and lust, yet Paul says: restrain yourselves, treat your bodies and the bodies of others with respect.

The world doesn't revolve around you, if your behavior causes others to struggle, you probably should adjust your behavior. **Get over yourself.**

Don't hog all the food at the Lord's Supper. Seriously! You're here early because you're wealthy enough to not work as much, save some food for those who are still working.

Everyone is gifted differently and guess what? All these gifts come from the Spirit and all are helpful, you're gifting doesn't make you more deserving or worthy.

Paul is trying to work with the Corinthians to show them that God's way turns everything upside down. What the world might say is beautiful and powerful is nothing in God's kingdom. **Weakness is strength. Foolishness is wisdom.**

People are interdependent, not independent.

The child is just as valuable as the elder.

The disheveled just as essential as the well dressed and well groomed.

The woman just as valuable as the man.

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Those on the periphery just as honorable as those at the center.

The person in the pew just as able to connect to God as the person in the pulpit.

In using the metaphor of the body, Paul presents the body not as a bunch of divisions, but as a **beautifully diverse and interdependent collection** of appendages and organs, each one united together, essential to the task of life.

So what does this mean for us today? What does this mean for Second Church? It certainly sounds good in theory. But is it realistic? Can we really live this way in America...in 2016...in an election year?!

To be blunt, if we don't work to live this way then what's the point of even gathering as a body? If we aren't striving for the greater gifts and a still more excellent way, why do we get ourselves out of bed on Sundays? Or gather in Triads? Or come together on Wednesdays to eat and worship and play together? Why do we work to engage in mission? Why do we have youth group? If we don't strive to be place where our differences don't divide us and the rambunctious 5 year old is just as valuable as those in suits and ties, **then we're no different than the rest of the world.**

If we're not striving to live out the vision Paul presents here then we're merely another social organization in a sea of competing interests. We might as well just retreat into our different camps where everyone thinks and looks like us and save ourselves all the effort of this body of Christ thing.

And yet, for many of us, that's not satisfactory, that's not a life really worth living. Sure, I love to talk to people who agree with me and think like I do, it makes me feel better at times, but that's not what God calls us to. As a Christian, there are many churches and plenty of Christians I'd love to disassociate myself from but, as Paul writes, they're parts of the body and my unease with them doesn't make them less a part of the body.

The body of Christ is and must continue to be a diverse body where those deemed as weak and insignificant by society as held up as loved and valued.

The body of Christ is and must continue to be one where we suffer and rejoice together, where we share tears and laughter together, where we work together despite our differences to bring justice to the oppressed and freedom to the captives.

But what does this look like lived out in real life?

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It looks like the fact that there are liberals and conservatives sitting in the same row as each other this morning!

It looks like a congregation where company presidents and employees are joining their voices together.

It looks like a congregation that rallies around families with tough diagnoses and then celebrates with them as a new life is born.

It looks like being served a meal on a Wednesday night by a rag-tag group of middle schoolers. A meal that we all ate happily (ignoring the germs that were definitely shared!)

It looks like the elders taking time in meetings to talk through sex and theology, striving to have open and honest conversation where the humanity and dignity of all are honored.

It looks like a recently updated our sound system as we work to be more gracious to those who are hard of hearing, acknowledging that they deserve to worship like everyone else.

It looks like the youth groups of First and Second Reformed churches joining forces to work with a deaf community in Jamaica.

It looks like our children at Second Stop playing Bingo with our friends across the street at Parkview.

It looks like Second Cup a few weeks ago...a young man had come into church that morning with what looked like most of his belongings. He told me that the church was the only place he could really think and get his head straight. As people began to trickle in a number came and found me in the office and wondered if he needed anything. And then a beautiful thing happened, people invited him over to the tables, offered him a cup of coffee, and struck up conversation with him. The young man was not made to sit on the periphery because he wasn't part of the 'normal' Second Cup crew; he was made a part of the body, even if he was just passing through.

It looks like anytime we work to acknowledge that each of us is essential to the function of the body.

It looks like anytime we make those deemed weak, indispensable. When we clothe those told they are less honorable with the most honorable of garments. When we give greater respect to those pushed aside and regarded as less respectable.

It's not easy. Society tells us to divide, to rank ourselves against others, to always think of things as us versus them.

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But God is calling us to a more excellent way. God is calling us to recognize our diversity as a gift and interdependence as our way of life.

So may we be a diverse and united people. May we be a people who depend on one another in community. And may we be a place where all are welcomed to the table, no matter where they come from.