This summer the pastors are preaching on a word each week. This Sunday our word is “body.” Last week Michelle Thomas-Bush preached on the word “gifts” using the first part of chapter twelve in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. Today we hear the remainder of that chapter. Listen now for God’s word to us today.

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. 13 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. 14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot would 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. 16 And if the ear would 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. 17 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 honorable we clothe with greater honor, 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 honor 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 honored, 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.

The Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

I am a member of several different organizations. I’m a member of AAA since 1991. I’m a member at Costco. Apparently I pay for that membership in order to shop! I’ve got an AARP membership card, but that’s not really mine. I only have it because of my husband. I’m a member of all sorts of reward programs at stores – the grocery store, the pharmacy, the pet store, the vitamin store, the garden store, the shoe store. I have so many of these cards that I carry them around in a bag.

Goodness!

And according to Paul, I am a member of the Body of Christ. This is a different membership, isn’t it? I have no Body of Christ membership card. My membership dues were paid long ago on a cross by a man named Jesus. My membership privileges are a little odd – peace
that passes understanding, hope in things unseen, glimpses of a kingdom
not of this world, a promise of eternal life.

We might find the word “body” in this passage a little ho-hum. We might
have heard it before, “We are members of the body of Christ.” But do we
hear it? Do we live it?

Paul wrote this letter to Christian living in the city of Corinth. We are far
removed from that time and that circumstance. In the second half of the
first century, if you were a person who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was
God’s son and you chose to follow him as Lord of your life, you were part of
the “church” wherever you lived. Disciples of Christ were a minority in the
culture. In a cosmopolitan city like Corinth, that small group of disciples,
“the church,” probably reflected the city. Rich and poor, natives and
foreigners, slaves and free, Jews and Greeks. If you were a disciple in
Jerusalem and you moved to Corinth, you were part of the church in
Corinth. You didn’t shop for a church. There were no choices. You didn’t
worry about whether the church had a preschool or a great youth group or
a Bible study small group. You were a member of the church in Corinth
because you believed in Jesus as your Savior and your Lord. We heard
about this kind of church in our first scripture reading – people caring for one another, worshipping and studying together, breaking bread together.

Paul wrote this letter to the church in Corinth because the disciples there were caught in turmoil and conflict. They were arguing about leadership, they were squabbling over who was more important, they were even being selfish when they celebrated the Lord’s Supper and some were arriving early and eating all of the food so that when others arrived there was nothing left (probably a class conflict – the poor were working too late to get there as early as the rich did).

In chapter eleven, Paul wrote them about this problem at the communion table. He reminded them that Jesus had called the bread his own body and the cup his own blood. How can you eat and drink in remembrance of him when you aren’t honoring one another with hospitality and respect? Then Paul turns from the bread and cup back to the church community itself. You are the body of Christ.

The bread we share at the table is his body.

And you, the church, with all of your diversity and your conflict, are his body.
You are members of the body.

The image of the body was used by philosophers in Paul’s time as a metaphor for Greek society. It was a common image. The Corinthians wouldn’t have been surprised by it. But they would have been surprised by what Paul did with that image.

You see, the metaphor of the body was used in the culture to support the status quo of class divisions and power structures. Each part of the body works for the good of the whole. All parts are necessary. The metaphor was used to urge the lower classes to stay in their place in the social order.

“Some of us are part of the head and we are in charge of the city. Others of you are toes, maybe even toe nails, and you need to stay on the feet and not try to rise above your given place in society.”

So if you are hearing Paul’s letter for the first time and you are a disciple in Corinth, you knew about the body and the members of it. But you never expected Paul to say that the weaker are indispensable (what? you can live without a toe nail!). You never expected Paul to say that the less honorable are clothed with greater honor and the less respectable are
treated with greater respect. Paul is teaching a kind of interdependence that is completely different from the way the “body” had been used before. The body depends on all its members. Every disciple has a role and those who seem less important are probably the most important and those who are lower are the ones to be lifted up. Paul is singing the same song that runs through all of scripture – valleys will be exalted and mountains and hills made low; the first will be last and the last will be first; the hungry will be filled and the rich will go away empty; the one who saves his life will lose it and the one who loses it for Jesus’ sake will save it. God’s way of community will turn things upside down and will value the ones who seem worthless. Jesus will be found among the least of these, among the toenails of society. All distinctions that matter outside must no longer divide inside the church. The ones who are promoted and elected and celebrated outside will not be the most important inside the church. The ones who are pushed aside and downsized and ridiculed outside will be valued inside the church.

So Paul takes a known metaphor and then radically shifts it so it’s no longer about keeping the status quo but instead is about valuing each member.
Then Paul takes it one step further. This body isn’t just any body. This body is the body of Christ. The bread we share at the table is his body. And you who gather to eat it together are his body. You are members of the body of Christ.

This body isn’t just any body. When you honor one another and respect one another, without superiority or division, you honor and respect Christ. When you work together for love, you are showing the love of Christ for the world. When the outside looks at the way you treat one another and sees your grace, you embody the good news of Christ.

I was not raised as a Presbyterian. My membership was in the Moravian church and I chose to become a Presbyterian as a young adult considering ministry. Sometimes I say that I became Presbyterian because of our polity, that’s the way we govern ourselves. I believe the Presbyterian way is a way that honors the body of Christ. We don’t put power in individuals. There is no pope, no bishops, no district superintendents. There are only bodies – communities of people who have to work together to make decisions. We don’t expect all of the members of the body to have the
same gifts. We aren’t a congregational system in which every member gets to vote on every decision. Some members of the body are called to preach and teach and we are teaching elders. Some members of the body are called to govern and lead, and they are called ruling elders. Some members of the body are called to care with compassion, and they are called deacons. All members are valued. All members have gifts. All members are called to ministry.

There’s an African proverb, “If you want to walk fast walk alone, if you want to walk far, walk together!”

Dictatorships are efficient. And benevolent dictatorships can be appealing. A body will always be inefficient. It will take longer to make decisions if it happens in community. It will not be easy. Sometimes it won’t be linear or rational or clear. Sometimes the journey will be meandering and circuitous and long. But walking together as a body of Christ is the only way to be faithful. It is tempting to walk alone so I can walk fast. It is tempting to think that I know what direction the body should head so I run off in front. It is tempting to go alone, so much less troublesome if I don’t have to slow down or change path or circle back or even sit and rest. I am a
Presbyterian because of our polity, because I believe the way we make decisions and move forward is faithful to being a Body of Christ. Sometimes we are slow. Sometimes we disagree with one another. Sometimes we value the people the world doesn’t value. The measure of our success isn’t our speed, or our productivity, or our unanimity. Perhaps our success will never be measured quantitatively. We are called to be faithful to the body of Christ.

Elton Trueblood wrote, “[S]imple people can be amazingly powerful when they are members one of another. As everyone knows, it is almost impossible to create a fire with one log, even if it is a sound one, while several poor logs may make an excellent fire if they stay together as they burn.” Simple people, like you and me, people who make things happen and seem to run the world, and people who are the world’s toenails – all of us together are the body of Christ. If we stay together, God will use the body to build an excellent fire, burning with love and grace.

Today’s word reminds me that I am a member of the Body of Christ because Jesus is my Lord. In my baptism, I became a member of this universal body. Connected to people all over the world, from every race
and land, gathering in sanctuaries and houses and tents and huts, coming to tables to take bread that is his body and to be his body in the world. I live out my membership in that universal body by journeying in community with this congregation, with you.

I am not a member because the church always meets my needs with the best preschool or youth group or Bible study. I am not a member because everybody else is like me and we generally agree on most things. I am a member because Jesus is my Lord and Savior. So I am part of a body with all sorts of people. I can’t opt out without damaging Christ. I can’t get disgusted and throw my toys down and leave the room. The Spirit gave me gifts for ministry. Gifts unique to me for my particular ministry. If I don’t do my part, the whole community suffers. I don’t believe being a member is optional. It’s not about my choice. My membership in the body is because God chose me and claimed me and I belong to God. I was baptized into Christ and I drank of the Spirit. I am a member of the body. And so are you.
We are the body of Christ and individually members of it. There’s no membership card. The dues have been paid. Now let’s be faithful on this long journey together. Amen.