

On Being a Member

C Epiphany 3--1 Cor 12:12-31a

When I first started at Holy Faith I made the mistake, in conversation with one of our bishops' staff, of referring to the church's members as, well, *members*. This staff person informed me, very earnestly, that the diocese/synod discouraged the use of such a word. Member, he explained, suggests a social club, and in small churches particularly, members often behave as if that's what they belong to, with no interest in connecting in mission to the wider community or welcoming newcomers or following Jesus or growing in spirit or number. He recommended that we use the word "disciples," since making disciples is really what we should be about, not gaining members.

Well, it's a point well-taken. I certainly believe that the church exists to connect with and serve others, and I like to think I'm as fond of the word "disciple" as the next person. I hope we *are* trying to follow Jesus as disciples together. But I also have a strong allergy to anything that smells like a language fad, and as this staff person spoke I was picking up on a faint but very distinct odor. Plus I guess I don't agree that "member" necessarily has to conjure up a social club. You can also be a member of a team that's trying to accomplish something, or a community, or a family. Membership implies belonging and connectedness and shared purpose, and these are spiritual experiences for which we all yearn.

Paul himself uses the word in today's section of his first letter to the Corinthians, only his use of it implies an even more profound connection to a larger whole than the meanings we've been discussing. The Greek word Paul uses might also be translated as a

"part" or a "limb." He calls the people in the Corinthian church "members" in the sense that a finger or a foot is a "member" of a body--a separate part with its own function which is nonetheless inextricably and organically connected to all the other parts.

And Paul is using this language because he's trying to get these Corinthians to move past the many cultural barriers that separate them and to become unified in their commitment to Jesus' Way. See this is actually a pretty incredible document, this letter to the Corinthian church, because it gives the lie to any notion that the church ever had a golden age during which everybody got along and just sang songs and played harps and faced Roman lions together like little angel apprentices. The church in Corinth is about as early as the church gets, and judging from Paul's letters, it's a mess. Made up of people from all walks of life--some Jewish some gentile, some rich some poor, some free some enslaved--these folks are constantly in conflict. The rich ones are bringing meals from home to eat during communion and not sharing with the poor ones. There are arguments about proper church hairstyles, of all things, and which spiritual gifts are the most important, and whether it's acceptable to eat meat that has been sacrificed to pagan idols before being sold in the market. One guy even seems to think it's okay for him to be sleeping with his father's wife! Yup, it's all there folks--sex, money, etiquette, worship style--all the controversies, large and small, that have vexed the church ever since.

And Paul is just trying to get everybody to put aside their differences and live out their commitment to Christ *as a whole, functioning community. Together.* Paul is just trying to get them to put the "we" before the "me." And the metaphor he hits on, brilliantly, is this metaphor of the body of Christ. You are all parts of Christ's resurrected body, he says.

Now Paul uses this metaphor in order to drive home two points. First, everybody counts. No one is dispensable. God has given each person different gifts, different talents and abilities, and those unique gifts are to be celebrated and appreciated, not compared and ranked so we can create a hierarchy of who matters the most. For what good is a body made up only of eyes and no hands, or only of a head and no feet? What a powerful message, in this corporate era of age discrimination and disposable labor and position elimination. What a powerful statement for us to try and live into: "We are Jesus Christ's body, and in Jesus Christ's body everybody counts."

And the second point of Paul's body-of-Christ metaphor, which is related to "everybody counts," is everybody belongs. *Everybody* belongs. We cannot, in fact, walk away from the body. We cannot "separate...from the love of God in Christ Jesus," as Paul says elsewhere, because we are welded into that love. If a foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," or if an ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make them any less a part of the body. So it is with God's people. And I think we can treat the phrase "God's people" as broadly as we can imagine. Everybody is beloved. Everybody belongs. In this world that rejects and excludes, you cannot un-belong yourself from God. That's just not what God is about.

I'm reminded of this story I heard on a podcast put out by the Moth, which is an organization that holds events where people tell true stories, live, onstage, without notes. This particular podcast featured a self-described "New York City cop" named Steve Osborne. Osborne's job was to hunt down and bring in fugitives who'd skipped bail.¹ So this one day, he shows up at this apartment looking for this kid named Hector, and this

little lady in her early fifties, wearing fuzzy pink slippers and a pink bathrobe, answers the door. It's Hector's mother. She looks confused and she tells Osborne that her son is dead, shot to death in the street the week before. So Osborne makes some calls, the story checks out, and he apologizes, but just before he leaves, just to make sure everybody's talking about the same person, he pulls out Hector's mug shot.

Now mug shots are about the ugliest pictures you can take, even of good-looking people, with the number across the chest and the harsh lighting. And this kid has this pockmarked face and a scar under one eye and these beady eyes, and it's just not a pretty photo. So Osborne shows her the mug shot and says, "Is this your son?" And the woman starts moaning and sobbing, and she takes the picture and hugs it to her chest as if she were hugging the kid himself. Then she asks Osborne if she can keep the picture. It turns out that his whole adult life, Hector lived this life of the streets, committing crimes and doing drugs, and he never came around for Mother's Day or Christmas or anything, so she has no picture of him. Now Osborne's a pretty tough guy, but even his heart is breaking for her a bit. And he's like, "Well it's Police Department property and we usually don't give these things out to the public, but if you have nothing else to remember him by, then be my guest."

So the mother takes the photo over to a shelf with all these family pictures. There's the grandfather in his World War II uniform, and weddings and graduations, all in their silver frames. And she puts the mug shot of this child she lost to the streets right in the middle of all those family photos. Right where he belongs. Right where we all belong, really, in the family of God, in the body of Christ, no matter what we've done or how hard we've tried to separate ourselves.

ⁱ "Steve Osborne: Mug Shot," *The Moth*, podcast accessed 8/31/09 at <http://www.themoth.org/podcast>.