

“Colorful Shalom People”

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

(Paul reminds the Corinthians that the “One Body”—the church—needs all of its parts and each is essential to the whole.)

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At first glance the meaning of this letter that Paul wrote to the congregation at the city of Corinth seems obvious. We can use various allegories; they all point to the same truth Paul was communicating: The church, as one body needs all parts—arms, noses, eyes, ears. The church, if it were an orchestra would need a string section, a woodwind section, and percussion instruments. The church, if it were a stew, would need potatoes, carrots, and peas. Or, the church, were it a rainbow, would need red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple and indigo.

On one level this Scripture passage can gently remind us that no one ministry within the church is more or less important. We—the whole church--need a Chairperson of each committee, but we—the whole church—also need people who wash dishes when we eat. A church full of chairs of committees wouldn't function so well. Lots of well-prepared agendas would abound, but maybe some dirty dishes would be left unwashed. Clean dishes and agendas are both important.

Notice that in his letter Paul stresses not only the *existence* of diverse gifts amongst the congregation, but that diversity itself is directly *attributed to the Spirit*, God. Diversity is not just tolerated, it essential, for the whole body. Paul doesn't just say it's nice that people develop different gifts; Paul says these various gifts are given by God. Four times he makes that point. He states that the diversity is *as the Spirit wills*. God placed the parts, each of them, in the body, as God wants them.

Why would Paul have launched into this long allegory in the first place?

Evidently because the people in the Corinthian congregation *didn't* quite look at it this way. It seems that the people were functioning in a hierarchical way...some gifts were indeed considered better than others.

That's certainly not true for us. Here, teaching, cleaning, singing, preaching, praying, are *all* valued and seen as gifts given by God we are empowered to do.

Every allegory reaches the limits of its ability to draw a comparison. There's a tendency when we think of a body to think that a hand is a hand is a hand. It wouldn't make a very good foot. We might subtly draw from that the conclusion that because we are a dancer, we probably shouldn't join the choir, because we're not as good at singing as we are at dancing. That's silly. We can both dance and sing and feel called to do both, even though we do one much better than the other.

It's quite unusual but even hands do become feet. I've told you of our good friend who had polio when she was 18. It affected both of her legs and her left arm. She's in her 70's now, and for all these years, she's only been able to move her right arm, but she's walked, by swaying her hips, with the aide of one crutch. Think about it: her right arm became two feet and two arms.

God may guide us to **be** parts of the Body of Christ, but God doesn't necessarily intend for us to be **stuck** in our present position forever.

I want to take this reflection beyond how we FUNCTION, what we DO, to who we ARE, how we see ourselves--what happens at the core of our identity. We can still use Paul's body allegory. Let's say I identify myself as AN ELBOW. I AM ELBOW. That does not mean I must always and ONLY be elbow.

We can be more than one thing at a time. I'm an elbow, but maybe I am actually ALSO a toe. Everyone knows I'm an elbow; I'm clearly an elbow. I look like an elbow. I even enjoy being an elbow. But, even while I REMAIN an elbow, I'm also a toe! How can that be? Well, I AM both. (Just as the dancer is also a singer.)

One way to see this is to think of the category of identities on forms with boxes to check—our cultural or ethnic “identities.” These boxes relate to our “beingness” not what we “do.” Using Paul's allegory we at Redlands First Church are blessed by including within this congregation people who have heritage from Germany, Italy, Ghana, Mexico, Canada, Ethiopia, Japan, the Philippines, China and other cultures. We not only are *blessed*; we can state boldly that God happily MAKES us this way, God wants diversity. But just as I like to **do** elbow things and like to **do** toe things, so I sometimes find that I **AM** two different identities at the same time. I am Irish and German; English and Native American. I don't know how to check only one box! (This certainly is a complication that has affected our 2010 Census.)

What if I AM elbow and toe? Hispanic and Filipino? A drummer and an actor? Can I be seen and valued not only as one of this diverse congregation, but as diverse in myself? A complex whole, myself?

One of the most touching relationships I had with a student while teaching in seminary was with a student named Maria who certainly looked Black, even to herself in a mirror. But, adopted, she had been raised by an all-white family in a virtually all-white suburb and had attended an almost all-white college. When she arrived at seminary, she was suddenly faced with an identity crisis. The thriving African American student group on campus assumed she would participate. They welcomed her warmly, as Black. But she didn't know much about Black culture. Who was she? Where did she fit? Fortunately, there was a church nearby which called itself a rainbow church. It was a Presbyterian church but their senior pastor was a UCC minister who was black and married to a white woman and their associate pastor was white and married to a black man. I called the Senior Pastor, a friend, and asked for advice. He pointed out that children raised of parents who are ethnically different than they are have a distinctively different experience from children who are raised by mixed cultured parents. When the parents are different from each other, the child *sees* diversity *all* the time and experiences their own both-and-ness. This minister's good news was that there were several people in Maria's situation at his church—send her over! Maria was orange, but also purple...How could she be both in a world that assumed that we stand in only one spot in the rainbow.

As Maria grew, she claimed both her orangeness and her purpleness and this both-and-ness would become not a “problem” for her so much as a double gift of diversity that she knew intimately from within. Creatively, over time, she learned to relate to orange people as well as purple people—what a gift from God!

A friend of mine, when traveling in France was stopped by several tourists who asked him for directions around Paris, in French. He responded, in French, not knowing the directions, but knowing in French how to say he didn't know. He was thrilled! Mistaken for being French! Voila! C'est bien. He belonged in the red color of the

rainbow as an English speaking American, but he was seen as green, too. He had appreciated the diversity of French people *and* American people, but to have a tiny bit of the diversity within himself affirmed was for him a gift from God.

That's probably true for many of you who prayed part of the Lord's Prayer in a different language today. You are color-full—you are both English speaking and a speaker of at least one other language... that means your ways of thinking and feeling are influenced by different language structures... you can see things in more than one way. You multi-lingual people and the seminary student Maria have something in common. You have diversity *within* yourselves. Yet, actually, we all do in some way. We not only are one color each that makes a rainbow when we're all together; but, each of us is a rainbow ourselves.

We are wise and foolish; type A and type B; obedient and rebellious; a mixture of cultures; a Padre and Giant fan . . . In our own being we house all kinds of mixtures.

Is this thinking about diversity of identities within ourselves in any regard what Paul intended in his letter to the people at Corinth?<sup>i</sup> Have my meanderings led us way too far from the point? While it may not be obvious, I don't think it's too far fetched. People in communities have wrestled with identity issues for centuries, as long as humans have had identities. *How* we belong, what we bring to each other, how we are seen by each other are sacred dimensions of life. Paul was applauding the wonderful diversity of gifts within the congregation. Part of the very diversity *is* the complexity of *each* individual, within ourselves.

The most hopeful picture I have for humanity is that every single one of us would be a **colorful shalom person**. Each of us would reflect a rainbow of diversity. We'd all be shalom. Shalom not only means "peace," but also "complete," "whole." Many thinkers of religion, psychology, and spirituality point out that the most whole, complete person is one who integrates lots of different aspects. Using Paul's allegory, each of us may be or become a little rainbow, which partakes of the whole body of Christ. Being complex, rainbow people, we become bridges for each other. The artist who is a plumber can explain to another artist what it's like to be a plumber, so that the other artist can have more compassion for plumbers. The one who is purple and blue can support another who is green, helping them to understand a most difficult-to-understand other—who is also purple. Just as translators are essential between language speakers, so too are all of us valuable in helping each other to understand people who are different in some way. So, the more of the rainbow we can incorporate into ourselves, that is, the more we become "Colorful Shalom People," the more helpful we are to the whole! **We're like universal "O-" blood types: universal donors to cooperation and peace.**

There's a wonderful book entitled, *The Color of Water* written by a Black man as a tribute to his White mother. His mother was the only white woman around as he grew up. He asked her one afternoon "whether God was black or white." After a deep sigh, she said, "Oh boy . . . God's not black. He's not white. He's a spirit." . . . "What color is God's spirit?" "It doesn't have a color," she said. **"God is the color of water. Water doesn't have a color."**<sup>ii</sup>

May we continue to pray to discern who we are, what we have to give, and how we can celebrate the people and gifts around us and within us.

On this World Communion Sunday, God—the color of water—flows in, around and through us all!

(On the way out of the sanctuary this morning, feel free to pick up another color of crepe paper, to remind you of your wonderful diversity within.)

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<sup>i</sup> Some may argue that Paul intended the arm to be the arm, i.e. women to do what women should do.

<sup>ii</sup> McBride, James. *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1996, 50-51.