

In the church, we need each other. Man, oh man, do we ever. We're like a body. And you know how it is with a body. The heart needs the lungs; the brain needs the heart; and what would arms and legs do without the gray matter upstairs? A body has many members, all of which need each other for the body to function like a body should. And that's how it goes with the church - the living, breathing, glorious body of Christ.

Paul is dealing with a disjointed congregation in Corinth. And he hopes in I Corinthians 12 to bring them together. Some of the members with more dramatic gifts, like speaking in tongues, have decided they are a cut above the average Christian. They are super spiritual, and in no way in need of those with lesser gifts. What could less spiritual members offer to them? We have something like a religious caste system going on in Corinth. Very spiritual at the top, not as spiritual in the middle, spiritual pedestrians at the bottom. Paul is not happy about this arrangement. Division and resentment are growing in the pews.

Paul levels the field by appealing to baptism. "Look," he says, "we've all been baptized. We've all received the same Spirit. And every one of us has received gifts from the Spirit for the common good." So of course they need each other. For the one who speaks in tongues to say he has no need for the one who has the gift of wisdom is like the eye saying it doesn't need the ear.

But we all know an eye can't hear. Every member matters in the church. The body only functions when members are connected, sharing their gifts, giving to and receiving from one another. Just for good measure, Paul ends his paragraph on various gifts by putting speaking in tongues at the very bottom of the list to counter the undo status that gift enjoys in the Corinthian Church.

Speaking in tongues isn't a divisive issue in our congregation, thank heavens. But there is a force that works against our unity. It's an idea that's been in our culture for about 300 years or so, the idea of the autonomous self, the independent operator, the self-made person, the self-sufficient architect of the solitary life. Do we need each other? Not really, the autonomous self says. It's nice to have company, and I might rely on others in a pinch. But basically, I stand alone.

This notion of the free, independent self runs so deep we aren't aware most of the time that we are operating out of it. But it flairs up whenever we think there's nothing more important than our rights; and then we fight over your rights versus my rights. You can also see it in our commercials that have as their hero the self-contained, successful man or woman who has risen to the top, usually attached to a nice car or a certain brand of whiskey. Many aspire to wealth precisely because they imagine money will make them independent, free from constraints, able to do whatever they

want to do. That's the underlying goal that often goes unspoken in our cultural matrix: autonomy.

But does the autonomous self exist? Is anyone actually independent from others? Patricia Madson teaches improvisational theatre at Stanford University. She often leads her students in an exercise to help them realize how much others have contributed to their day to day lives. She asks her students to look around the room and to name all the folks who've had a hand in making it possible for them to be sitting in that classroom that day. Well, someone had to make the desk where they are sitting, and someone had to design that desk and run the factory where the desk was made. Someone hired a trucker to delivery it, and someone unloaded the desk from the truck. Someone else cleans the desk, and someone else repairs it when necessary, and yet another person built a budget so the desk could be purchased when needed. We could go on and on, and we've only talked about the desk! What about the clothes the students are wearing, the light fixtures, the visionaries who first established Stanford, not to mention parents and teachers who groomed the students to sit in those desks? Madson says anybody who does this exercise will have a great chance to be grateful for the multitude of people who have fed into their lives. We also have a chance to see that complete independence is an illusion. Interdependent describes us better.

We live in a web of interconnectedness. We depend on others; others depend on us.

What's true of people in general is even truer in the church. We need each other. We're not ashamed of this truth. We embrace it. Like any body, we know we're so much more together than we would be alone. Those who teach come together with those who plan who come together with those who serve to make a living, breathing something we couldn't be without each other. If we withhold the gifts the Spirit has given us because we don't believe we have any, the body suffers. If we try to do it all alone, eager to give but slow to receive, the body suffers. But when we acknowledge our gifts from the Spirit, and share them freely, giving and receiving for the common good, the body thrives, becoming much more than the sum of its parts. Paul never uses the word interdependent, but he doesn't have to once he calls us the body of Christ. You know how it is with a body. We are knit together, and knit to Christ, who is the head.

Baptism is a natural time for us to talk about needing each other. Clearly, Macauley needs us. She needs us to teach her the stories of the Bible that are central to the faith. She needs us to show her how to worship and pray. She needs to watch us treat each other with grace and kindness so she'll know the steps when she gets older. Perhaps most of all, she needs us to love her, to

convey that she is worthy of our attention and concern as if she was God's gift to us, which of course, she is. Macauley needs all of us to help her grow up Christian, and we have (we will) pledged ourselves to the process today.

But the road of baptism runs in both directions. We need Macauley, too. Her presence gives us something to do. When babies are in the house, our job becomes clear and we know our next move. I used to get frustrated over how much the church worried about whether or not it had any young children in its ranks. I saw this worry through the most critical eyes. It sounded like a desperate need to survive gone out of control. But now I think there's more to it than that. Having Macauley and other babies around reminds us of our mission. We're not here just to nurture our faith. Our job is to spread the word of grace to the next generation, and the built in desire to do this runs very deep. All sorts of energy gets released, all manner of powers get engaged once little babies are in the house. Without saying a word, Macauley is telling us we've got work to do. Without that happy work, it feels like something is missing.

We also need Macauley's gifts. We don't know what those gifts are, yet. But we'll see them soon enough, and our job will be to help her see them, too. Maybe she'll have the gift of organizing and ordering the world around her. Maybe she'll have the heart of

a servant. Maybe she'll receive the gift of encouragement. It will be our delight to watch her gifts emerge and to make room for her to use them for the common good. Until then, we'll just take delight in the gift of her dimply, smiling, round bottomed self, so precious in case you haven't noticed. Maybe one of her greatest gifts right now is simply to be with us and to increase our joy. Whatever her gifts are, we need them every bit as much as she needs us.

Lynne and I took a day last weekend to visit Blowing Rock. Somewhere on 19E, tracking up the mountain, I noticed a small church beside the road, very small. It had room maybe for three people maximum. You've heard of tiny houses. Well, this was a tiny church. And I remembered there have been times in my life when that size church was very appealing. Maybe just two or three people just like me and God, maybe just me and God, and forget the rest. Don't tell me you haven't fantasized about the same thing. You're wasting our breath. I won't believe you.

Some folks don't even need a building to make their escape. You will hear them say, "The golf course is my church," or "The back porch is my church," or "Nature is my church." These folks might also say that they are spiritual, but not religious. They've had it with the institutional church. Maybe they've had enough negative experiences that they can't take church life

anymore. Or maybe they've never darkened the door. Either way, they're not going to be a part of the body of believers. They'll find their own path. I can imagine some security and relief in that.

But then I think, "I can't go it alone." Church is flawed and broken, but it's also the place that's knocked the rough edges off of me. Church has held me up when all else was letting me down. Church has communicated the most radical, saving news I've ever come across, the word of grace that still knocks me blissfully off my feet from time to time, the glad word that God loves us in spite of all we do wrong. Where would I go without the community of the church? What would I be? I need you all. We need each other, giving and receiving the gifts of Jesus Christ.

We're baptized. We're done pretending we can make it on our own. We gladly accept our need for one another. And it is our delight to welcome Macauley into our ranks. She needs us; we need her; and all of us need Jesus, who holds us together through the Spirit and makes us one.