

The Anglican Communion and the Church in Corinth
The Rev. Mark Wilkinson, Rector
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church
January 24, 2016
1 Corinthians 12

The message in today's Corinthians passage really smacked me in the face this week. Paul is writing with great power about what is wrong with the church then and now. We as members of the modern church are Corinth written in large letters across the face of the earth. I am just as guilty as the rest and find myself thoroughly convicted by Paul's passage in regards to how I view and treat other parts of the body of Christ.

Paul's image of the community being represented by a body was a standard metaphor in the Greek rhetorical world. Paul however stands the normal metaphor on its head if you will. The standard metaphor was loaded with hierarchical images. Some body parts were more important than others, like the head and the heart. Others were subservient or inferior to the more important parts of the bodies. Paul puts all on a equal footing.

Last week Paul made clear that there are a variety of gifts of the Spirit, none are more important than others. Paul this week makes the point that no part of the body is more important than the other, that all parts are dependent upon the other. Eyes and ears are both needed for without one or the other the body is either blind or deaf. Without hands or feet the body's ability to do the work given to it is diminished. Paul speaks of the inferior parts, which are the internal organs, are what we clothe with great honor. This was a revolutionary look at what had been a standard metaphor.

The event that brings this to mind was the meeting of the Primates in London two weeks ago. "*The Episcopal Church is suspended from the Anglican Communion*" was the headline in many papers. Several of you have asked me about this. Since this directly relates to our epistle this morning I want to fill you in on what is going on and how it relates to our passage today about the church in Corinth.

The first gathering of bishops in the Anglican Communion was the Lambeth conference back in 1867¹, which in terms of church history makes this a new thing. They have met every 10 years since then. The membership has changed as the British colonial world fell apart. From an all white, all male group there are now a majority of people of color and some women, although many churches in the communion do not recognize female clergy either priest or bishop. The Archbishop of Canterbury and other leaders decided that more frequent meetings were needed but the logistics and expense of bringing all the bishops together

¹ For a more complete history of Lambeth go to <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/pages/lambeth-conference.html>

was too much. So for the past 30 years or so the Primates, the leaders of each national church have met in an advisory capacity between Lambeth conferences.

This meeting is advisory and has no real power to do anything. To quote the dean of the seminary at Yale, "Saying the Primates speak for the Anglican Communion is like saying a Senate Committee speaks for the entire Senate." So we have not been sent to the corner in the time out chair. We are still members of the Anglican Communion. The issue is LGBT rights and the treatment of LGBT in all the countries involved in the communion. That ranges from full inclusion in some provinces and to church support of their arrest and incarceration in others. This is not an insignificant issue.

The point of all of this is that there really is nothing new about squabbles within the church. We have never been one homogenous church. The first church fight dates back to the very early church where Peter argued with James in Jerusalem about whether new Christians had to be circumcised as Jews before they could be baptized. Today we read Paul's letter to a fractured church and in this fight we see the church today.

The Archbishop of Canada wrote the following about the meeting: "

Throughout the meeting of the Primates last week, I thought much about St. Paul's teaching about the Church being the Body of Christ in the world. It is the image at the very heart of Anglican ecclesiology. It informs the manner of our relationships in the Church local, national and global. In 165 countries we are 85 million people proclaiming the Gospel of Christ in more than 1000 languages. We are a family of autonomous Churches that understand ourselves to be "Formed by Scripture, Shaped by Worship, Ordered for Communion, and Directed by God's Mission". We are bound together by the long held principle of "Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence in the Body of Christ" articulated at the great Anglican Congress of 1963 in Toronto.

While for the most part this principle inspires our common work and witness, there are times when our capacity to abide by it is deeply challenging given the very diverse political, cultural, social and missional contexts in which we live. While being ordered for communion, we recognize that in the face of deep difference of theological conviction over certain matters of faith and doctrine the bonds of affection between us can be strained, sometimes sadly so, to the point of people speaking of a state of impaired communion.²

² Fred Hiltz, Archbishop of The Anglican Church of Canada
<http://www.anglican.ca/news/a-reflection-on-the-meeting-of-the-primates/30014029/>

So what is the response that we are called to give to this situation within the Anglican Communion. I believe our Presiding Bishop spoke eloquently following the meeting. I want to show you his response.

<http://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/episcopal-church-presiding-bishop-and-primate-michael-curry-actions-anglican>

I think our Presiding Bishop understands the Body and I pray that we do too.
AMEN