

Where Everybody Knows Your Name

1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-31a (NRSV) *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. ¹³For 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. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If 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. ¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The 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.” ²²On the contrary, the members of the*

body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and 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; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And 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. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But strive for the greater gifts.

Those who grew up in rural or older urban areas will remember the front porch. Slave owners in the South often attached porches to slave dwellings, and that feature grew to popularity in the mid-19th century as the industrial revolution made leisure time more accessible for the working family.

The front porch afforded an alternative space for families to gather—essentially an outdoor parlor, a word that comes from a French verb *parlez*, which means, “to speak”. It implies a social nature of the space.

The porch was a cool place to gather on warm evenings. Families gathered to tell stories. Mothers rocked their children to sleep on the porch swing. Couples courted on the front steps. The porch encouraged a slower-paced life.

But it's its outdoor nature that makes it unique. It moves private life into view of the public; a place where people could engage with the community and remain within the comfort of their own home. Passing neighbors could engage in brief conversation or be invited up to sit for a spell. Business was often conducted on the front porch since it gave negotiations a public setting—out in the open.

Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* develops largely on various neighbors' porches, where the characters share community news. Maybe the easiest platform for storytelling, the porch's communal nature demonstrated a closer relationship

between family and society, between private and public life.

After WW II, American architecture shifted. The automobile became more affordable, middle-classes moved to the suburbs, and a new social class emerged: the commuter. And with attached garages they could transition directly from the anonymity of the car to the privacy of the house without engaging any neighbors.

Privacy replaced community, and the front porch all but disappeared as television and air conditioning lured families indoors. It was replaced by the backyard patio—with a BBQ pit and a privacy fence.

So, with some exceptions, of course, Americans became nameless, faceless homeowners, indifferent to the nameless, faceless neighbors who surround them.

I wave and speak to my neighbors, and even chat occasionally; but the most frequent occasion for relating is when the letter carrier leaves their mail in my mailbox. Most often I fit the pattern of returning home after work to retire either indoors or on the deck, even when "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood."

But privacy comes with a price. It's a short distance from privacy to "isolation," and isolation leads to a number of emotional and psychological issues. While America's privacy has increased, so has consumption of valium, Prozac, pain killers...

For the second week in a row, the Lectionary readings lift up the importance of community in the life of the people of God. Humans are, by nature, social creatures. God created us for relationships—with each other and with God. God called Abram, whose name meant, "may my father be praised," and changed his name to Abraham: "father of a multitude"—a nation; a people. Jesus called disciples to be "fishers of men," and said, "If I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself."

When Peter made his "Good Confession," "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God," Jesus responded, "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church," and in the original language of the New Testament it is "I will build my *Ἐκκλησία*"—my gathering—my community. The legacy of Jesus is much more than a private spirituality of salvation for an eternity in heaven.

In the passage Dian read from I Corinthians, Paul's metaphor of the Body may be the clearest biblical statement we have regarding the centrality of community in the Judeo/Christian faith.

In recent years, the writings of Paul—or at least our understanding of his writings—have become a focus of controversy; in fact, in some circles it has become popular to be critical of Paul. When placed in the context of 21st century cultural and theological awareness, I see the issues; however, when examined in contrast to the cultural and theological context of his time, I'm less critical.

But wherever you stand in relation to Paul, I repeat that his metaphor of the

Body may be the clearest biblical statement we have regarding the centrality of community in the Judeo/Christian faith:

...as the human body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. | *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..*

One of the few places this emphasis on community still is expressed openly is the neighborhood tavern—in far too many cases even more so than in the church.

I remember Ira, a farmer in the church I served as student pastor. He was an alcoholic, and I don't know how many times his wife called me to drag him home from the tavern, or to go with her to the judge to have him committed, again, to the state hospital to get dried out. I even took a gun away from him once when, in a drunken stupor, he was threatening to kill himself.

I recall the first time his wife called me to drive him home from the tavern... I was raised in the Baptist church. I'd never been in a tavern before. I was nervous, expecting to encounter the stench of vomit, loud honky-tonk music, guys breaking chairs over each other's heads...

They were playing dominos. Laughing. The place was quiet, and smelled of Lysol, and Dave Brubeck was playing softly on the P.A. Ira was the only one who was visibly drunk. He saw me and grinned and said, "Hey, Preacher! Have a drink!"

I walked over and he took my arm and gently pulled me down into the chair next to him and announced, thickly, "Guys, this is my preacher. His name is Jim, and he's a good one. You guys oughta' come hear him sometime. It'll do you good. Why, sometimes when I hear him preach, I can stay sober the rest of the day."

Everyone laughed. I said, "Ira, can I borrow your keys, and drive you home?"

He said, "Preacher, if you can get me into the car, I'll give you the keys." I did; and he did; and we sang "Amazing Grace" all the way home.

I had gone in expecting a drunken brawl. I found a community of friends. Years later, every week, I would remember that night when I heard the theme song of one my favorite shows: "You want to go where everybody knows your name."

And I think back on that night occasionally still, when I visit a church, and nobody speaks to me. I think that's what's missing in a lot of churches today; and I think I first realized that, not in church, but in a tavern.

While it's crucial to acknowledge that we're here to worship God and to learn how to follow Jesus, one of the most important elements in fulfilling that purpose is to build a context of close, loving community. You just want to go where everybody knows your name. [PRAYER SLIDE]