

Playing the Piano with Sixteen Fingers

1 Corinthians 12:12-24

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A few years ago, Daniel Wegner, a professor of psychology at UVA, set up an experiment to study transactive memory. That is, he set up an experiment to study the group dynamics of memory making. That sounds strange maybe, because we often think of memory-making as an individual process, but Wegner had rightly recognized that couples, groups, churches, and nations even, develop systems for remembering. Sometimes it's an intentional and complex system involving a lot of people—as when in a large corporation, certain people are delegated to gather and remember facts in a certain area; other times the process of memory-making is a simple, largely unconscious system between couples or among small group members. Wegner was interested in the latter couple and small group memory making systems, which as I said are largely unconscious.

For his experiment, Wegner recruited 60 couples, all of whom had been dating for at least three months. Thirty of the couples stayed together as couples. Half of the couples were split up and paired with strangers. Then, the couples and the new pairs were asked to read and study 64 statements for five minutes. When Wegner called “Time,” the couples and new pairs were asked to collaboratively remember the statements they had just been studying and to reproduce these as best they could. Guess what? The **couples** as opposed to the new pairs did a much better job of remembering the statements. The reason? Wegner concludes that as their relationships developed the couples had unconsciously devised a system of memory-making between them. So, for instance, the female half of the couple instinctively knew to remember all those statements that had to do with food and literature; the male half instinctively knew to remember all of those statements that had to do with motors and music. The new pairs had not developed such a system and so each half of the new pair had to try to remember every statement.

I was telling my sister-in-law about transactive memory. She jumped in with her own story about how it works between her and my brother. She has always been good at remembering numbers. She can tell you most of her friends' phone numbers, for instance. Remembering numbers is not a gift with my brother. So, when they got married six years ago, he began to depend on her to be his walking, talking roll-a-dex. Now, he doesn't bother to remember any phone numbers at all. On the other hand, I know that my brother loves sports. He can tell you who played in the super bowl for any given year. If

they had taken that test of 65 statements, my sister-in-law would have remembered all those statements with numbers in them; my brother, all those statements having to do with sports.

I mention this transactive memory business because it is exactly what Paul is talking about in our scripture passage for today. Just as in marriages or couple arrangements people learn how to use each half's different interests and predispositions to function successfully together as a unit, so it is in churches. Paul uses a delightful if simple analogy of body parts, to get his message across. I say simple analogy and it is. In fact, I have sometimes wondered if Paul, here, in this section of Corinthians, were not talking to children. But no, I've decided that poor Paul was just trying to introduce a difficult concept into a feuding community. To do that he decided to speak to the lowest common denominator. Paul compares church members to body parts. We are each of us, like body parts, in that we are different; but if we are functioning properly within a church community, we use those differences to work together for the good of the whole body, which is, the church. The analogy may be simple enough for a child to understand, but the concept behind it is difficult. The difficult concept Paul is introducing to the community at Corinth is that it is possible to have unity despite diversity. That is a concept that still is beyond the church's understanding most of the time.

Think about it. Paul's vision for community was that folks who OWN slaves would be able to sit at table with folks who ARE slaves; that folks who speak Greek would be able to share bread with folks who speak only Aramaic; that a weathered fisherman might be able to study scripture with an Ethiopian Eunuch. We are still working on practicing unity despite our diversity today, aren't we? Am I willing to study scripture and learn from a Greek Orthodox or a Roman Catholic? Am I willing to share bread with a homosexual or a lesbian? Will I drink from the same cup as a homeless person?

Paul goes further than to chide the Corinthian church about opening itself up to diversity. He insists that therein lies its strength. As he says, "If we were all a single member, where would the body be? As it is there are many members yet one body." That is true, of course and that is what David Wegner's experiment so beautifully exemplifies. We each have different gifts and interests that lead us to take on different roles, and responsibilities and that can be a boon for whatever unit or group we are apart of—as in a marriage or a church. We see that exact thing happening here at Cove. Some of us have musical talents, some of us are leaders, some of us are good cooks, some of us are builders, some of us are scholars. Somehow all of our different gifts come together to make a wonderfully disorganized yet beautifully orchestrated Cove Church. How did that

happen? For sure it did not happen overnight. We had to work at divvying up our responsibilities and determining which gifts among the many we have were for the good of the body. Again, as David Wegner's experiment proved, that work might have been unconscious with us, yet it was so.

These are good words to reflect on this day when we are taking in two new members. The two folks who are joining us come with many gifts; in fact, they have already shared some of their gifts with us. James makes sure that we have coffee and food on Sundays. James among your many gifts, some of which we are only beginning to discover, are your generosity and your dependability. Marcia's gifts lie in the artistic realm. She is an interior decorator by profession. She has a creative flare and genius that is inspiring. Marcia helped us decorate for Christmas. I'm sure we will be turning to her for advice as we make plans to paint our sanctuary and add some needed touches to Cove Hall. Also, as the ladies of this church now know, Marcia is a gracious hostess and a superb cook.

In the months and years ahead, I am hopeful that we will be adding other people to our membership. That is part and parcel of what it means to be a Christian community—bringing in new members. As I heard in a sermon once, “The church does not exist for those of us in here. It exists for those of us out there.” When I heard that, I remember thinking to myself, “Well, then, I guess I should leave.” The pastor who said those words, though, didn't mean that we ignore or scorn the people in our pews. He meant that we have to be committed to sharing the good news and the good fellowship we have here, always with a look toward those outside our community. If we don't do that, we stagnate, turn inward and become no more than a club or a sect. We become preoccupied with our own self-preservation. That is not what Christ intended.

I want to return to Paul's analogy of body parts to talk about church growth. The analogy of body parts works well when we talk about diversity but how does it relate to growing our church? Think about that for a moment. For example, what if you woke up one morning and discovered that where once you had five fingers on a hand, there were now eight? Egads! And just to make things interesting, let's add to that that you are pianist. Double egads! New fingers, new members, you get the analogy, right?

You could be aggressive with those fingers and just cut them off. But let's assume that you hate the sight of blood and you are not very fond of pain either. That being the case, you have two options.

One, you could just ignore those fingers. You decide not to use them at all. You hope and pray that with time they will shrink, wither and drop off. While you wait, they flop around as you go about your daily tasks and especially when you play the piano, but you can live with them. They don't really negatively impact your piano playing all that much.

The other option is to welcome those fingers! Hello fingers, glad you are here! Now, actually that is not right, is it? In the short term, you probably won't be all that glad that each hand has sprouted three new digits. Think about trying to buy gloves that fit! Think about trying to unscrew the top off a toothpaste tube. And, how in the world will you play the piano using all those extra fingers?!

Let us say, though, that you decide to rise to the challenge. In the long term you are able to integrate those extra digits into your life! In fact, there eventually comes a time when you can't remember what it was like to have had only five fingers to a hand. Typing is so much faster; you can multitask in ways that leave other people standing in the dust. And your piano playing! You develop a new eight finger method of playing the piano. You become wildly popular as a pianist, and before long you are doing photo shots for People's Magazine!

Ok. I've stretched the analogy to the breaking point, haven't I? Do you get my drift though? Right now growing the church is fun, easy and exciting. We are able to integrate our newcomers very well. But growing the church can become somewhat painful. In fact, I would argue that if we don't begin to feel a little clumsy and if we are not a little uncomfortable then we aren't doing enough to grow and integrate people who come through our front door.

The good news is, new members, as we have witnessed by the addition of Marcia and James to our numbers, add significantly to our life here at Cove. They help us to be the church that Christ intended us to be. Let us, then, celebrate what may become our sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes clumsy life at this church as we continue to grow and become a thriving, God centered community of faith. Let all the people say, Amen