

A DISPLAY OF UNITY

1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-21

The phenomenon of hazing is a fascinating example of some of the complex aspects that make human beings social creatures. Of course hazing usually happens to people who want to join institutions like fraternities or sororities or secret societies. It can also happen to athletes who are rookies or freshmen on sports teams.

Usually hazing occurs where the one pledging is forced to do a bunch of humiliating and/or painful things in front of the veteran members of the group, or even sometimes in front of random people in public.

Hazing can be dangerous and taken to extremes however. People have died from hazing rituals and many states and also private institutions like universities have banned hazing outright. I went looking for examples of hazing at fraternities and sororities and quite honestly most of the examples I found were so horrible that it wouldn't be appropriate for me to even mention them from the pulpit. But I'll give you a couple of examples of some of the tamer ones I found.

In one fraternity the ritual was that all the new pledges had to strip naked and were then blindfolded, driven to a farm near the campus, forced to roll around in manure, and then forced to walk all the way back to campus. Another fraternity would make all of their new freshman pledges go into an inflatable bouncy house and go 3 rounds

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of boxing a couple of the senior and biggest frat guys with these oversized inflatable kids gloves. All the fraternity guys would laugh as they watched the poor freshmen get pummeled by the seniors who had been boxing for years.

Sometimes the hazing rituals are specifically tailored to an individual's weaknesses and vulnerability. One story I saw was of a freshman who had real trouble growing facial hair. So what the frat guys did to him was they drew a mustache and beard on his face using a sharpie pen. Everywhere he went for an entire week he had to sport this ridiculous looking drawn beard and mustache on his face.

So why do these hazing rituals exist? Who would willingly endure such physical pain and emotional humiliation? Well, it is thought that such rituals exist to build a sense of camaraderie and fellowship among members of the institution. Those willing to endure all that pain and humiliation show a level of commitment to the group, which in turn, generates mutual respect.

There's also the idea that such rituals build trust. Everyone in the group has had to go through their own humiliation, and everyone knows that everyone else in the group has had to do likewise. So in that sense there is a kind of brother and sisterhood because they've all been through the gauntlet together.

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There is tremendous power in that notion that everyone in a group has been through the same thing together. For something like a frat house the hazing ritual might be the only thing that builds that sense of unity and camaraderie because if you think about it each person is otherwise very different—they are majoring in different subjects, they have different hobbies, they are from different backgrounds and so forth.

Now, I'm not advocating for the policy of hazing, but I do find that there is one little bit of wisdom and insight in the practice. The wisdom is that unity among members of any institution does not just magically happen. Unity is achieved proactively, you have to build it.

For institutions like fraternities or sports teams, oftentimes creating this sense of unity must be artificially generated through hazing or initiation rituals which have no lasting meaning for the person beyond just their ability to get through it. But for people of faith the unity created is ideally more organic and does not have to be artificially generated. However, for people of faith, the building of unity still involves a certain mindset about some fundamental truths of our faith.

It involves acknowledging a sense of in-it-togetherness. Given that Christianity is shrinking in numbers and influence across this nation at a more alarming rate than in previous generations, we need unity now more than ever before. We cannot afford to be fractured. We do not

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have the luxury of picking and choosing what Christian circles are worthy of our fellowship and what ones are not. Simply in order to be consequential in society today the church needs to be of one accord.

In our text for today Paul uses the analogy of the human body to convey to the Corinthians the importance of unity. He used this analogy because there were all kinds of problems within the Corinthian Church that were preventing them from achieving an organic sense of unity. So I want to take a couple of minutes to describe those problems.

Apparently some members thought they had a deeper relationship to God than other members in that church. And because they thought this, it manifested itself in all kinds of ugly and sinful behavior. For instance, some people bragged about possessing special kinds of spiritual gifts that other people in the Corinthian Church didn't possess—specifically, the gift of speaking in tongues.

Speaking in tongues became a badge of distinction whereby some of those who spoke in tongues believed they were better and more spiritual and thus more important than the rest of the people. Some members in Corinth had the twisted notion that because they had such a deep relationship to God, that God didn't care what they did with their bodies.

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These folks ended up getting drunk during Communion, they visited prostitutes, they sought out meat that had been sacrificed to idols so they could eat it in order to make a point. They believed God looked past these things and didn't care about them because these members believed they had an elevated relationship to God where all God cared about was the welfare of their spirits.

In other words there were some members in the Corinthian Church that were looking down on other members, not thinking that those other members counted for much, figuring that those other members had an inferior relationship to God, and believing that those other members didn't contribute much to the church in terms of representing Christ to the world.

And of course what happens when such beliefs of superiority are held by some members of an institution, and when those beliefs find expression in certain patterns of behavior? What creeps in is discord and disunity. And perhaps even more tragic than that, the other people start believing the lie and begin to internalize feelings of inferiority about their own worth and their own value in the eyes of God.

This pattern holds true for any institution, and it certainly holds true for churches. Those who are not part of the "in circle" of powerful or gifted people actually begin to question their own gifts and talents and

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contributions to the church if that “in circle” broadcasts their superior status either subtly or overtly.

This is why Paul writes the whole letter of 1 Corinthians, to curtail these beliefs and patterns of behavior and to try to bring unity to the church there. When we come to our passage today Paul uses the analogy of a human body to get his point across. The human body is an intricate network of very complex moving parts all needing to work together in perfect harmony and synchronization. Each part of the body is crucial for the body’s full functioning.

By using this analogy Paul is saying to the Corinthians that every person has a critical role to play in the complex task of representing Christ to the world. Now, Paul’s churches were made up of the most diverse array of people anyone could find anywhere in ancient Greco-Roman culture.

His churches consisted of Jews and Greeks and people from all kinds of ethnicities, slaves and free, men and women, and people from all kinds of socio-economic statuses. And furthermore this group of very diverse people all had various roles to play in the church. But obviously some people were envious of the roles and tasks that others had and did not feel they themselves were contributing much to the body in their present roles.

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Paul counters these feelings by saying that all of the Corinthians, regardless of their current ministries in the church, are *all* a part of the body. Wanting to be in a different and supposedly more important role does not make one any less a part of the body in their existing role. And as we all know, the body needs all parts to be fully functioning for optimal performance. Paul is saying that the body *needs* all of those parts. And likewise the church *needs* everyone working together in their various roles.

Let me say that again. The church *needs* each and every one of us here. God has called all of us to be a part of this family of faith. So long as you feel that this calling remains, the church would be incomplete without your presence, without your talents, without the gifts you bring. This holds true for all people in individual churches, but it also holds true for all the churches that make up the Evergreen Association.

We pride ourselves on being an enormously diverse association of churches. We are ethnically diverse, politically diverse, theologically diverse. And lest any church think they are not as important as other churches because of who they are or what they believe, Paul's analogy of the body is equally applicable to our association as it is to any single church.

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One of Evergreen Association's core values is unity. How do we foster and maximize unity? We do so in two ways. The first way is by acknowledging our dependence on everyone else within our respective churches and within Evergreen itself. We maximize unity when we confess that we don't just welcome or accept churches, we *need* every church in Evergreen in the same way that our churches *need* every person who comes through their doors.

Losing out on any one of you—losing out on any of the churches within Evergreen would be a blow to unity because God has drawn us together for a reason. God has drawn us together to form a beautiful, complex, intricate system—like a body—to perform the most awesome task imaginable, representing His Kingdom in this world.

To think that some internalize feelings of spiritual worthlessness, to think that some despise their place within churches, to think that some may check out all together because of these reasons would be a tragic disruption to God's will for unity. But fostering that sense of unity starts with acknowledging our absolute reliance on everyone around us.

The other way that we achieve unity is to remember that we are all in it together. The seal of our in-it-togetherness is the Holy Spirit, given to

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all of us. I love verse 13 where Paul says we were all given one Spirit to drink.

I used to work at a coffee shop. One part of our training was sampling all of the different kinds of coffee roasts that our shop offered. I quickly discovered that coffee tasting, like wine tasting, is an extensive and elaborate process.

Before even sampling the coffee we were instructed on how to drink the coffee. We had to let it sit in our mouth for a moment and to actually make biting motions while the coffee was in our mouth in order to release all of the flavors latent within it.

We were instructed to notice what region of the tongue we were tasting it on because the flavor of some roasts hit the front part of the tongue, some hit the back part of the tongue and some hit the sides. We were also instructed to notice how smoothly it went down as we swallowed it.

This kind of drinking that we did was so intentional and deliberate it was almost awkward because most of the time when we drink anything it is a rather mundane and thoughtless process. When Paul speaks of believers drinking in the Spirit, I think he's leaning more toward my coffee tasting experience than he is toward the countless times we thoughtlessly drink fluids throughout the day. To drink in the Spirit

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means thoughtfully ingesting it and letting the Spirit sit within us. It means taking note of the way the Spirit “tastes” and “goes down.”

Acknowledging our in-it-togetherness brings me back to my observation about hazing. Rather than something painful and humiliating, our in-it-togetherness is forged by something entirely positive. It is forged by the same Holy Spirit that each one of us drinks in.

Our talents and spiritual gifts are different. Our stories of coming to faith are different. Our stages in our relationships to God are different. But we all possess one and the same Spirit. If we savor that spirit, and know that our Christian brothers and sisters also savor that same Spirit, then we are well on our way to unity.

I have zero artistic ability, which is perhaps why I was so fascinated and impressed by the painter Bob Ross. He used to have a television show on PBS called the *Joy of Painting*. And within the span of about 30 to 45 minutes he would crank out these beautiful paintings of nature landscapes. He was the guy with that big afro who would, in a very calm and relaxed voice, say things like, “We’ll put a happy little tree over here in the corner,” or “let’s put a happy cloud up here.”

Over time the blank canvas would slowly begin to take shape. At first it just looked like an ugly blur of lines and smudged paint. But as he kept

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working at it, adding tone and resolution to it, and etching away at it, the canvas would evolve into a beautiful painting. He would have his painter's palette with different smudges of paint. He would have a variety of brushes and painting knives. And he masterfully manipulated all of it to produce beautiful works of art.

In a way each one of us, with the various roles we play, and with the spiritual gifts we possess, are like a dollop of paint, or a brush, or a palette, or an easel, or the canvas. And the painter is like the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless we may not feel very consequential in our spiritual work. We may not feel like we're producing very much.

It may seem like that stage in Ross' paintings where everything is still incoherent and ugly. But if we patiently and prayerfully drink in that Spirit, if we see all people and churches as integral parts to what God is trying to accomplish, if we come to rely on each other and take solace in our in-it-togetherness, we will produce something beautiful.