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## *What is Strength in Christ?*

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**The Cathedral of St. Philip**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
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**Epiphany 3 C**  
**8:45 a.m. & 4:00 p.m.**  
**1 Corinthians 12:12-31a**

It had been a quiet beginning to my shift as the on-call Chaplain at Northside Hospital that afternoon. The small thin phone that could summon me to unknown places in an instant had been quiet. I still secretly harbored the hope that it might be quiet throughout the night. But I knew that was unlikely if past experience had much to tell me. I had already gotten the reputation among my colleagues for reporting on call shifts they were happy to have missed.

The phone this day did not wait long. It was barely after five p.m. when the call came to come down to the emergency room. I was to go and meet a family in the "quiet" room. This room is away from the hustle and bustle of the waiting room and is not a place you hope to find yourself. It is a place where you are likely to get bad news. I knew things were not good if I was asked to wait with someone there.

When I arrived there was a nervous looking man in construction work gear. He had accompanied a fellow worker in the ambulance and placed a call to his colleague's wife. After a few minutes, a young woman came racing into the room. The man rushed to her and said, "I don't know what happened. One minute he was fine, the next he collapsed on the ground. The doctors are with him. We don't know anything else at this point." She looked at me with a look of raw terror and asked if I knew anything. I said, no, but that as soon as they had news, they would come here first. She kept saying in what felt like a mantra, "But he was fine this morning. This doesn't make any sense. He was fine, just this morning."

After waiting for what seemed like a year, the door opened and a doctor came in. Still standing, he told the wife that her husband had suffered a massive heart attack. He had not survived. The doctor then said that after she had a moment to collect herself, she could go and see him. The door shut, the co-worker embraced the young woman and she began to wail. She said, "I can't go look at him. If I do, this will be real. I can't go look at him."

More time passed, and she finally got up and said, "Ok, I'm ready." "I can see him." She looked at me and said, "Will you go with me?" I nodded and we walked down the hallway to the room where her husband lay. I sat with her as she cried and screamed. Kissed his face and called out to God her questions and her anguish. It was terrible to see and hear. It was sad. But it was holy ground. There was no pretense. There was only the raw connection she felt to her beloved and her longing to have God present in the midst of her grief.

We had been there about 20 minutes when there was a knock on the door. Her local pastor walked in the room and immediately began to take charge. He said, "Come on now Lorraine." "You need to pull yourself together. You need to be strong for your boys." "The time for falling apart is over; we'll help you be strong. You do not have the luxury of being weak."

When the home pastor arrives, the chaplain is cued to step aside so the primary relationship can support the loss. But as I left the room, I was angry. Why was he telling her to be strong as if her grief was weakness? And how did he imagine that half an hour was enough time to move through the shock of this loss? Did he really imagine she could simply cut herself off from the power of these feelings? And how was the raw unity of her connection to her husband and her God to be better if she was "stronger?"

,"The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,"

In this well known passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we are challenged to take seriously our role as the Body of Christ. It is challenging because we are asked to take all of our notions about our own strength and control and throw them out the window. Paul reminds us that the categories of separation that we use to define ourselves, --- strength/weakness, rich/poor, Jew/Greek, needed/dispensable are no longer relevant to us as Christians. They speak to a state that existed prior to our being claimed by the unity we find with Christ. While we might still refer to these categories out of habit, they no longer exist. They have crumbled before our very eyes to give us a new vision---God's vision. We now must see a deeper and more important unity in the power of the Spirit.

We are called to imagine the world as God sees it. But even as we say this, we realize its absurdity. How can we claim to have the eyes of God? Yet Paul makes the bold claim that in our baptism, we have already taken on the nature of God. Our job is to now start acting as if we really are what we are--- as the Body of Christ. He does not tell the Corinthians that they need to change who they are, but that they need to stop denying who they have already become in Christ.

To honor that unity requires a new way of being. We must operate with the knowledge that we are inextricably linked with one another. We can no more consider ourselves individuals, than the foot or hand can imagine a life separate from one another. We may pretend to deny parts of ourselves or other members we are joined with. But, to act in that way does not change the reality of God. There is a deep inner ordering in the body of Christ that refuses to divide itself. The more we recognize that changed nature within ourselves, the more we can see it throughout the Body of Christ.

To even have a chance of seeing as God sees, we have to assume that most of our categories are self- deceptive or at least self-protective. When we find ourselves feeling strong or weak, better or worse than someone else, we have already started down a slippery slope. Being part of the Body of Christ means there is nothing in me or in my fellow human beings that I can be separated from. I may wish it were otherwise, but to deny the connection is an act of violence against the very nature of the Body.

Like most of us I have been deeply affected by the devastation in Haiti. If there is a gift in such tragedy, it is the inability to separate ourselves from it. I suspect most of our emotions have not remained a constant, as we have watched events unfold. We have moments of elation, when we see a young child with a smile larger than his face raise his arms as he is pulled from days of entrapment. We wonder as we see a young man miraculously removed from the rubble eleven days after the quake. We are angry as we see supplies stuck on tarmacs and medical supplies unable to find their way to those who need them. We are overcome with generosity and give to our brothers and sisters to ease their pain and suffering. We are afraid when we hear of potential riots over water and supplies. We are ambivalent in our knowledge of the poverty that existed before the earthquake.

And within all of these, we hold on to a deep Christian hope that even in the midst of death and destruction, there is the possibility of resurrection.

This is as it should be. All of our feelings point us towards our deep connection to these members of the Body of Christ. But the strength of these feelings cautions us as well. We need to remember who we are as the Body of Christ. Because, I think there is also a subtle temptation as we engage with the plight of the people of Haiti. In the face of their pain and grief, it can be hard to hold their gaze and see ourselves looking back. We might avoid their gaze and imagine they need us more than we need them. That we are the powerful, called to provide aid and assistance. They are the weak, the dispensable, except for our generosity.

"The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you',on the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker

are indispensable, God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior members, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

Paul reminds us who we are. We do not see as God sees. It is not their suffering and our generosity. Their suffering is our suffering. Our generosity is their generosity. We do not know what is strong and what is weak. We can only be assured that it is all integral to the functioning of the Body. We cannot be separate from suffering if we are connected. If we are part of the Body of Christ the call is to recognize that unity which is already there.

Amen

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