

TEXT: But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

A couple of years ago a church member here, after hearing the hymn *Won't You Let Me Be Your Servant* wondered aloud if First Plymouth should drop the use of the term "member" and change that instead to "servant." We were walking down the corridor toward Plymouth Hall, just ten feet from the beautiful illuminated stained glass windows that Janet Rich and others have worked so hard to have restored. For me, at least, this comment was one of those stop-you-dead-in-your-tracks-with-your-mouth-wide-open kind of moments. I simply stopped walking and I must have looked like a deer in headlights as the rolling insights of that off the cuff comment set in.

Being a member of a church, or any organization, is an odd thing. Back in Deerfield, Massachusetts where Andrea and I served as co-ministers for fourteen years, there were a number of regular, involved attendees who simply would not join the church. "I've never been a joiner" was a frequent comment. Paradoxically, these were often the folks most involved in the life of the church and its various ministries. For people who were not joiners, they sure were involved. "The game is played by the people who show up," one of these folks would often say.

As I have thought and prayed about this, and as I have worked to understand what it means to be actively involved in a church, I wondered if the letter to the Ephesians would be a bit different if its author were writing in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Oh, then there would be such a great metaphor for what it means to be part of a church! Sports! Here is something that kids especially can get their minds around, and which we adults fully understand. Imagine if you will how some of the epistles would sound if, instead of using the Body of Christ metaphor, we heard instead of a team. "And his gifts were that some of us should be pitchers and some outfielders, some infielders and some managers, to equip the whole team for ministry . . . We must grow up in every way into him who is the head coach, into Christ, from whom the team, positioned and playing together by every player with which it is equipped, as each player is performing properly, promotes the team's growth in building itself up."

This is not as hokey as it sounds (although I admit, it sounds VERY hokey). As we heard in the children's sermon, if everyone was a pitcher, where would the outfielders be? If everyone was a manager, where would the pitchers be? If no one took the field at all, where would the team be? (The team would forfeit the game is where it would be; the team members would not be fulfilling the purpose of the team.) This is one metaphor that powerfully resonates with American culture.

Kids have this drummed into them from an early age. Take, for example, children's participation in ice hockey. Because of limited facilities where kids can practice on ice, time at a rink is carefully doled out. It is not unusual to have a practice at 5:00 o'clock in the morning. That means these dedicated parents have to get up, and get their kids up, at roughly 4:00 AM, maybe even 3:30, get dressed, fed and out the door to the practice. And the coaches are real, real clear: if the child does not come to at least 80 – 90% of all practices, then the child does not play

in the games. And if the child does not show up for a game, the child will not play in the next one. It is about the team and the commitment and discipline it takes for any team to work. And those words about each member working properly: kids' skills are carefully evaluated and every attempt is made to put them where their gifts are, where they can do their best and be happiest. Coaches count on the fact that they will have some kids who are great goalies, some who have the agility and speed to be on the wings, some who like the physical contact of being a defender. The coaches need them all, for all the varied skills are required to make the team work, just as regular participation and practice are required to forge them into a team, just as showing up for the game is required for the team to take the ice at all.

Some clergy are actually taking the sports metaphor seriously and are beginning to change the language and structure of the churches they serve. In the years 2000 – 2005, when I was not serving in a church, the congregation I attended most frequently was trying to take this new path. The minister refused to refer to herself as a minister. She was the coach. She explained that she, therefore, did not take the field as a player: that was the members' responsibility. Her job was to equip them for ministry, to get them in their positions and teach them how to play those positions. Although she never said it this way, she essentially was promoting the idea that Christianity is not a spectator sport; it is not like buying tickets to an Avalanche or Rockies or Broncos game and then sitting in the stands and cheering or booing what is happening on the field. Nope. She explained that if you joined the church you joined the team and the only way, the ONLY way the team could function was if everyone, EVERYONE, took the field at their appropriate positions. The game is played by the people who show up, by the people who show up and PLAY; not by the people who show up and shout from the sidelines telling everybody else what they ought to do; and the game is particularly not played by the people who don't show up at all, hear about the game and complain about what happened, or didn't, when they were not even there.

The church as a team: many players, various gifts, regular practice, focused participation, purpose in doing. The team metaphor does have its use, as far as it goes. It does remind us that it takes all of us simply to be able to take the field and that the team suffers if it does not have a player. It does remind us that Christianity is not a spectator sport and that we do not hire professionals to take the field in our stead. It does remind us that the game is played by the people who show up and that carping from the sidelines, or outside the stadium, is not, in any way, shape or form, playing on the team. The team metaphor does have a lot to offer us.

But the team metaphor also has serious drawbacks when it comes what it means to be a church. The most serious drawbacks are that a team's purpose is to win whereas a church's purpose is to serve; a team's focus is on itself and its members and the church's focus is on God and neighbor (both members and non-members); a team is measured by success and a church is defined by fidelity, by faithfulness. A team works for itself whereas a church LIVES for God.

LIVES for God. Lives. The church lives; it is a body. The church is organic. The church is a living, breathing body which exists because God breathed into its nostrils the breath of life. This is an important theological point. We talk in church about being inspired, and that term is in fact a faith-originated term. For to *inspire* is to in-spire, to breath in; inspiration. In both Hebrew and Greek, the two languages that make up the 66 books of the bible, the word for 'spirit' is the

same word for 'breath.' The blessing of understanding this is that we are aware that we become living beings not when certain chemicals get together in our bodies, but when God breaths into our nostrils the breath of life. For we are more than physical; we are also spiritual. Love is not a chemical, and meaning in life is not a molecular interaction. We are in-spired by love, by God; it this Spirit that defines who we are *as a body, as a living whole*. And therefore, with images that are far more organic and powerful than a team we can understand how deeply both the unity and diversity of the body depend upon our spiritual participation. For even if we just see ourselves as an arm muscle, then the body is weakened when we are not actively present; if we are a little toe the body is unbalanced when take our toe and go home; if we are an artery then the body is not fed when we are on the sidelines complaining to others that are playing that the body is bleeding (trust me, they already know it).

My brothers and sisters in Christ, we need each other. We need each other's gifts as surely as we need all our body parts. We need each other's presence as surely as we need the food we eat. We need each other's spiritual love as surely as we need the air we breathe. And more than this, we need each other because it is only together that we find ultimate meaning and purpose in our lives. For we do not live for ourselves alone. Meaning is not found in personal fulfillment alone. Rather, meaning is found in working together toward an inspired end that draws us together on a particular path to a particular place. Meaning is found in offering our individual gifts so the body can be coordinated and whole. Meaning is found when we individually and corporately respond to the Spirit, seeing and understanding ourselves as servant members of the servant church of the servant Christ. Meaning is found when we speak the truth in love, and grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Amen and amen.

PRAYER BY Kit Cowperthwaite

Loving God –

As we explore tried and new ways to move our church through these difficult times, we seek your help and guidance so that we can sustain and grow our church, enabling our faith journey and enhancing the lives of our congregation both spiritually and emotionally.

We ask for your help and guidance in giving of ourselves in ways that make a difference—to our families, our church, the communities in which we live, work and play, our nation and to our world which we share with so many.

We ask for your help and guidance in dealing with this troubling period of political and economic uncertainty and distractions.

We ask for your help and guidance in encouraging all of us to give of ourselves and motivate others to do the same to allow us, like living stones, to be built into a spiritual house.

And, knowing that we are but mortal men and women, we ask for your help and guidance to fuel our work with vigor, stamina, a healthy spirit and a good sense of humor.

For all of this, we give our thanks.

Amen.