

Members One of Another
19th Sunday after Trinity
(From *the Epistle: Ephesians iv.17 ff.*)

*17 This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, 18 Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: 19 Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. 20 But ye have not so learned Christ; 21 If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus: 22 That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; 23 And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; 24 And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. 25 Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: **for we are members one of another.** 26 Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: 27 Neither give place to the devil. 28 Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth. 29 Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. 30 And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: 32 And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.*

***Romans 12:4** For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: 5 So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.*

***I Cor. 12:12** For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ... 20 But now are they many members, yet but one body... 27 Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.*

***Eph. 5:30** For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.*

What a mysterious idea! The Scriptures teach us that believers are somehow both members of Christ's very own body, and also members *one of another*, as today's Epistle puts it. Frankly, I can't envision a greater level of intimacy among relationships of any kind. I could be your friend, or your neighbor, or even a part of your family, but to be your *member* --organically attached to you as an arm would be to a hand, or a foot to a leg, with the same kind of mutual interdependence and responsibility-- how can such a thing possibly be? A whole host of questions arise. As your member, what are my responsibilities to you? Just how far does this thing go? Can I be content with keeping you --no pun intended-- at an arm's distance? How far beyond our current experience of church and Christian fellowship should this concept really be able to take us? What do we owe each other. and what is the consequence of our falling short of this reality?

First, we must remind ourselves that this is not a mere ideal... it is the way things really are, whether or not we see them actualized in our own church situation or anywhere at all in the current practice and experience of the church. The Bible doesn't bend its definitions to suit the

abilities of men, to fit neatly into their categories, and to conform to their comfort zones. Rather, it expects men to rise, with the help of God, to meet its divine mandates. Yes, it fully expects and anticipates our weaknesses and failures, but it certainly doesn't condone them, nor will it permit us to indefinitely remain within their power. The goal, after all is to conform us to the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). This is our destiny. So when the Scriptures declare *we are members one of another* they are plainly stating the quality of relationships within the Church: we are inseparably bound to one another, as are the limbs of a physical body bound to each other. Therefore our duties to each other pass way beyond those normally required of other human organizations, even beyond loyalty, or allegiance, or mutual acceptance, although these are certainly included. We are *members*, both *one of another* and *of his body* (Eph. 5:30). This means that wherever I go, you go with me; that whatever I do, you are involved. If I sin and depart from the Lord, in some very real fashion I take you with me in the flood of my failure, and if I strive to please and obey Him, I raise you up with me as I raise myself up. There is no getting around it. This is the reality of "membership" as the Scriptures see it, and if we treat this idea lightly, and utterly fail to take hold of it, the actuality of the matter is not altered one whit. One could merely be a church-goer and escape these implications. After all, what's involved in entering and leaving a building? But it is impossible to be a Christian and not have to deal with them, sooner or later.

So all of that said, there are things I simply must not say or do, because they violate that cherished union we have as members. How can I say that your needs and concerns don't matter? How can I fail to pay attention to your struggles and complaints? Let's return to today's Epistle. How can I *lie to you*, and *be persistently angry* with you? How can I *steal*, knowing how my private sins will invariably affect you? I must *let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from me, with all malice*, because as your member I am too close to you --no, I am united with you-- to be able to put you at a distance through such behavior.

But what is it that unites us? Common beliefs? The same religious habits? No, it is not *what* unites us, but "Who...": *And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption*. We are made members one of another by the One who lives within us, God's Spirit: *For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit* (1 Cor. 12:13). There is another active factor in this equation of membership... the Third Person of the Trinity. There would be no Body of Christ without Him, for just as a physical body requires a life force, the Holy Spirit is the Agency of our spiritual union. Sins against our status as *members one of another* also *grieve the holy Spirit of God* ("grieve" translates a Greek word which includes the meanings: "to throw into sorrow, to offend, to make one uneasy"). Think of it! Aren't there words you would never have dared to say, or things you would never have done, around your

parents, or grandparents, or teachers? In this age of shameless conduct, are we not amazed at the unembarrassed wickedness that has no scruples? But the hurt we cause one another in Christ's Body *grieves the holy Spirit of God*. It offends, saddens, and hurts Him. What do *you* do when company with which you must persistently abide causes you continual offense? After much repetition, do you stay around for more of the same?

Now, the apostle ends today's Epistle with a word of advice that should pierce us to the heart: *And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted [compassionate], forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you*. Being kind is an activity. It is "outreach". If I avoid your gaze, sit beside you and stare straight ahead, do my best to escape personal interaction, and basically live within my own little world, I may not have hit you on the head with a two-by-four, but I have deprived you of *kindness* and *tenderheartedness*. The absence of any positive activity on my part toward you is as harmful in its way as my hostility toward you. I am your *member*. How can I withhold from you what you need? How can I keep back from you that which I certainly, as a Christian, have the power to give you?: *We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done* (BCP p. 6: "General Confession). And we are called upon to *forgive*, because as long as we are here, and live in association, the need to do so will never cease. There has been only one Person who walked the planet who never needed to be forgiven. The rest of us stand daily in need, both from God and from others. How often, I must wonder, have I received this grace from the people who fill my life, totally unknown to me!

I can take exception with anything, if I so choose. I can call black white, and white black, and in these times that worship disorder, I may even be praised for doing so. I can chafe against God because of the choices He has imposed upon me, including people I neither care for nor easily tolerate, and with whom I appear to have little in common. But if they are fellow believers I have been moved into a proximity with them that leaves no space of separation between us: we are *members, one of another*. Coming to terms with that fact, and acting upon it, will determine the validity of any confession of faith I may make, and, even more significantly, be the surest sign of my love for the One who *hath forgiven us*, brought us into family relationship with Himself, and called us His very own Body.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.