

A Framework for Growth
A Sermon by Louise F. Westfall
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Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: I Corinthians 12:12-27

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry at Time magazine's choice for 2006 Person of the Year: You. Yes, you. The issue cover's Mylar computer screen reflected the reader's own image. You are worthy of the annual honor, Time claims, because you "control the Information Age" and spend a lot of time watching You-Tube and blogging, surfing the worldwide web without leaving the comfort of your home. In a *New York Times* op-ed piece, Frank Rich suggests that Time's choice points to the mindless escapism in which Americans beleaguered by depressing real-world information have found refuge [*New York Times*, December 24, 2006].

I'm no Luddite, and I do appreciate the potential good of the Information Age with its creative and flexible communication options. In fact, thanks to the volunteer efforts of some savvy church members, our worship services are now podcast! You can listen anytime, anywhere. You can also blog about sermons, share your perspective or offer your advice, all from your computer terminal. We believe these options help us strengthen our connection to members, broaden our contact with others, and widen our welcome beyond these walls. One of you even gave me a Wall Street Journal article about pastors who preach sermons they found on websites such as [creativepastor](#) and [sermoncentral.com](#) (I haven't tried it, because I'm afraid you would think it was the best sermon I'd ever preached!)

Nevertheless, it's ironic that the technology that brings the world to our private gaze, that "flattens" it, eliminating borders and barriers, also isolates us from it. Even if you don't agree with Rich's diagnosis, you know that computers remove us from personal contact, from face-to-face interaction and actual

encounters with living, breathing, hurting, happy people, using conversation that can't be deleted or terminated at the hit of a button. There are many windows on the web, someone has noted, but not many doors. Yes, you *are* the person of the year. You, me, but not "us."

Christian faith is nothing if not communal. In the Biblical story of creation, God fashions one individual and immediately realizes that creation is not complete: *it is not good that the man should be alone...* (simpler, maybe, but not better!) Somewhere back there at the very dawning of human life, the idea of "community" was born. Couples, then families, tribes and kinship groups developed to meet various needs. But you don't need a history book to tell you what happened next. Adam and Eve started in right away: "The woman you gave me, she made me eat the forbidden fruit!" "That Adam! Always blaming ME for his bad choices!" And so it has been, from that time forward. Where two or three are gathered together, God is there, as Scripture says, but so are disagreement, conflict, and struggle.

Sound like Church? It's not surprising. We are connected to each other by virtue of our connection to one God, one Lord Jesus Christ. But we're different people, with a variety of perspectives, backgrounds, needs, expectations. We see things differently. How can we develop a single vision that will inspire effective ministry? How can we possibly grow a community of caring, one that offers a potent alternative to the world's "high tech/low touch" culture?

The morning epistle lesson addresses these questions head-on. Corinth—a cosmopolitan city of education and culture---was full of diverse and opinionated people who brought these qualities to their new church life. Their disputes prompted them to seek counsel from the missionary apostle who had established many churches throughout the Mediterranean world. Paul responded by describing the Church as a body. But not just any body: Christ's body—a reality which suggests ways and means to be a loving and growing faith community of

vision and service. Listen for God's word to us in the reading from the first letter to the Corinthian churches, in the twelfth chapter at the twelfth verse. [I Corinthians 12:12-27]

South African archbishop and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize Desmond Tutu tells a story of the scene in heaven after the risen Christ returns from his earthly sojourn. All the angels and archangels are really happy and singing alleluias in celebration. And this one frowning angel goes up to Jesus and says, "Jesus, Jesus, you've done everything the Father wanted you to do down there. Whom did you leave to carry on your work?" And Jesus replies, "Why my disciples of course." The angel is shocked. "You don't mean Peter who denied you?!" "Hmmm. I mean Peter." "And Thomas who doubted you?" "Yes, Thomas too." "Surely you don't mean the others who ran away?" "Yep. The ones who ran away." "But what if they fail...what if they fail, Jesus?" Comes the answer: "If they fail, I have failed."

Well Jesus didn't fail and those disciples didn't fail. We are all proof positive of that. But the story reflects the Church's amazing legacy—that we are called to do Christ's work—and the gracious truth that every one of those heirs is unique and magnificent.... and flawed. The church would be perfect....except for the people! Yet from those imperfect individuals the grace of God creates the body identified as the real, physical presence of Christ in the world. Let that sink in for a moment. You are body of Christ. You—and you---and you---and me---and many more out there. Together, we are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

The "body" metaphor reveals both how the church is to treat its members, and how the individual members relate to the whole. For example, no fewer than three times does the text declare that God arranged it so that all members would not have the same gifts, but that within the one body there would be variety. Diversity then is not simply a condition to be accepted, but is an integral part of God's gift to the church. Something to be pursued, not unlike working out in order to

develop toned abs and fit cardio functioning. In our differences we find beauty and power and maximum health.

Every part is indispensable. Let me say that again. Every member of the church is indispensable. No one can replace you; no one else can duplicate your gifts. If Christ alone is head of the body, then beyond that there's no hierarchy of value. The little toe is as important as the eye, the appendix is as cherished as the lungs, the nose is as beautiful as the lips. Sometimes we may forget that and focus attention solely on the parts that are most obvious, the leaders who are in the pulpit or sit on the councils and chair the committees. But if you've ever broken your toe then you know how hard it is to walk! The suffering of one part of the body affects the whole body. Each individual member of the body is to be cared for, loved, and appreciated, because each part is indispensable. God needs you. This church needs you. We need each other.

On the other hand, the body metaphor provides a strong counterpoint to the individualism so prevalent today. The parts must be connected to the body in order to function! We join ourselves with one another in a spirit of interdependence to keep the body whole and healthy. The work Christ calls us to do doesn't seem like an impossible mission when we are together, contributing what we have and who we are. If the individual members of the body minister to one another, the body thrives and is capable of doing whatever God requires of it: bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, freeing the oppressed, teaching the sixth grade Sunday school class, preparing meals for Guild luncheons, singing in the choir, building a community youth club--- well, you get the picture.

So what about the body of Christ known as Fairmount Presbyterian Church? How does this 90-year-old body grow? The leadership team of this church has spent the better part of two years prayerfully and actively considering a vision to shape our ministry and mission in ways that will energize our members, attract others, and connect us with one another in

ways that will help us continue Christ's work. Last October I asked you to participate in a visioning process by naming the things about Fairmount you most cherish and want to preserve and to identify needed reforms. Those responses were summarized in the January newsletter. A bulletin insert today lists the specific suggestions you made—let's look at them together, front and back. Your ideas have been organized into four categories that reflect our organizational structure. As you can clearly see, there are many suggestions. We have many members with lots of ideas and a multitude of perspectives. Yet we are part of one congregation, led by one Lord, filled with one Spirit, guided by a single vision. Will you help us prioritize our tasks by placing a check mark by the ten items on this list you believe should be given the highest priority in the near term. If you do not see an item you believe should be on the list, feel free to add it in the 'comment' section. Then place your completed form in the offering plates when they are passed, or turn it in to the Main Office later. We'll be mailing every member the same insert and your responses will help us refine and shape our growth plans. It will be a great pleasure to invite you to a potluck supper and program to introduce the specific ministry initiatives on Saturday, March 3.

Finally, let me offer one example of how the body ministers to its members, and the individual members minister to one another. Yesterday we said farewell to a long-time member, Stu Merz who died suddenly last week. Stu had completed the visioning exercise last October and signed his name so I had opportunity to ask him about his suggestion which was to "offer more visible encouragement to members to volunteer in the work of this church." Stu explained that while he had attended worship regularly for years, he had never really gotten involved until Dick Clewell "persuaded" him to come to the Men's Breakfast Forum. With some hesitation he did and was surprised to see a whole new side of church. Friendships developed as conversation was shared over coffee and bagels. Members of the group supported each other through challenges of job loss and transition, illness and grief. When

the men learned of some particular needs of the church, they responded. Stu was one who volunteered and along with Walt Stuart and Bob and Betty Olson, joined the team who come in every Monday morning to count and record the previous day's offering. He enjoyed the work and companionship, and told me that he would never have known what he was missing had it not been for the personal encouragement of the men.

Friends, let us give ourselves to the body of Christ with faithfulness and zest, and then trust God to bring forth growth and complete the good work begun. Amen.

[SILENCE FOR A FEW MOMENTS TO COMPLETE THE VISIONING EXERCISE, THEN INVITE THE UNISON RESPONSE IN FAITH, PRINTED IN THE BULLETIN']

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