

(1 Corinthians 12:12-31 NRSV)

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

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We Are Many

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: January 25, 1998

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31.

This morning you have heard one of the more familiar passages from Paul's letters. It is a great passage for the church. It reminds us that we are different from one another. We each have certain traits and capacities. But it takes the metaphor of the human body to make sense of these various capacities. The human body is made up of many different parts; all are important. They have different talents. The finger cannot see like the eye. But on the other hand the eye cannot hold your fork like the finger. So, too, Paul's thinking goes, we, though very different from one another, gather here in a common body, the church, with a common purpose. And that common mission is served by each of us bringing and sharing our gifts.

It's a helpful reminder, this passage from Paul, that difference is important to our very survival and thriving. Were we identical, we would work no better than a body made entirely of toes. And yet, a common mistake many of us make is that we look down on those who are different, wishing that we were all the same, all toes. Rather silly, isn't it.

Well, that was what I was going to preach about this morning. But I have decided that I must speak about something else. For what I wish to speak about, I can still take part of this passage from 1 Corinthians as my text. Verse 26 reads: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." We are bound together, one to another. We are not islands. And, therefore, it is with peril that we let or cause others in our human family suffer.

Last week we celebrated Martin Luther King's great work and his understanding that racism, and the suffering which it causes, makes us all victims of its insidious degradation. The same logic applies for all the other 'isms we hear so much about. Anti-Semitism: can anyone doubt that the state of Germany and the world at large were made less at the hands of Adolph Hitler? Does the degradation of women affect only women? No, of course not. Does spewing hatred against gay and lesbian people affect only them? No, the perpetrators sacrifice a piece of their humanity in the process. And the rest of us, so long as the hatred and the victimization continues are made smaller, too.

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Like the body in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we will be whole and fully functional only when all the parts are working together and when no part is degraded by another. It is this consideration, that no part be degraded by another, through which I want to look at the current crisis in the presidency of the United States.

I suspect that many of you have heard already more than you want to about the latest in President Clinton's difficulties. After all, every news bulletin, every front page, and every talk show seems to be consumed by the sordid details of the possibility of a sexual relationship between President Clinton and young Monica Lewinsky. I can't blame you if you've had enough. And perhaps you've even come to church to get away from some of the craziness, to find some solitude and calm in the prayers and songs and preaching of the church. I certainly can't blame you.

But I am, nonetheless, compelled to speak on the topic. I find myself compelled to speak because I believe there is something urgent and essential at stake, which I have not yet heard in the debate.

The president is under suspicion for some kind of sexual relationship with a young White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. Special prosecutor Kenneth Starr has launched an aggressive investigation into the alleged relationship, and into the possibility that the president or others may have lied about it. The debate rages, and various positions and issues have emerged.

Some believe that whether or not the president had an affair with Ms. Lewinsky is the president's personal business and that it should not be subject to governmental investigation. They go on to say that the president's personal life has nothing to do with his ability to govern. In fact, they say, all this attention and controversy detracts from the business and the real issues facing the government.

Following this line of thinking, many believe that the media has made far too much out of the whole thing, and is thereby failing in its job. It is hard to disagree with this view, at least a little, when you see the reporters like piranhas, tearing at the president, shouting questions about his sex life while he is in a meeting with Yasser Arafat. I certainly found that embarrassing. But, for the most part, those who believe the media are making too much of this are the same ones who believe that the president having an affair with Ms. Lewinsky isn't a big deal in the first place.

Others argue, on the other side, that a question of character is at stake. They want to say that the president's character is at stake. This group takes personal morality very seriously. This group is, also, generally written off by others as conservative reactionaries.

Another issue has emerged. Has special prosecutor Kenneth Starr exceeded his authority? He was engaged to investigate the president's involvement in Whitewater, and an affair with Monica Lewinsky is a long way from a land deal in

Arkansas. There have also been concerns that special prosecutor star may have used unauthorized means to get some of his information.

The questions about the special prosecutor are clouded and fueled by partisan politics. One view suggests that the only reason the special prosecutor is pursuing this so vigorously is that he is a Republican. In fact, the proponents of the partisan politics view want to suggest that the whole controversy has been invented by the Republicans out to get the president.

And, finally, the area where there seems to be the most agreement that something significant is at stake. Did the president lie? Did the president or those close to him ask others to lie? Here, most agree, is a point of real trouble. If the president lied or was involved in a cover-up, he's in trouble. They say, like Watergate, it wasn't the crime but the cover-up which is important. I agree that it is a very serious matter whether the president lied. Since having an affair is a kind of lying right from the beginning, I'm less sure why people see the alleged crime and the alleged cover-up so differently.

There is one point that I have yet to see discussed in anything that I have seen or read. There is one point that doesn't seem to be on the screen at all, a point which to me is the most important of all.

If this alleged sexual relationship took place, it is not just a personal issue between two consenting adults. It is not even just adultery. It is not even just a matter of the president's character and integrity. It is not even just a matter of whether the president lied. All of these may be important, but the most important point is that if there was a sexual relationship between the president and Ms. Lewinski, then the president of the United States is guilty of sexual abuse.

The definition of sexual abuse is very clear. It requires that one person have a good deal more power than another. It requires that the person with the power be in a position designed to protect the best interests of the other. And it requires that the person with the power uses that power and the trust of his or her position to elicit sexual favors.

When these three conditions are present, there is no such thing as consenting adults, because the appearance of consent is canceled by the power the other exerts. This power is not necessarily, or even usually, obviously coercive. It is more subtle than that. If a professor seduces a student, the professor has respect. The student may look up to the professor. The student may feel noticed and valued by the professor. If the student is insecure and yearns for that kind of affirmation, he or she may be especially vulnerable to the professor's interest. The student may even encourage it. It may look like consent, but it is not.

In every profession today this understanding of sexual abuse prevails. Between professor and student, doctor and patient, lawyer and client, minister and parishioner, or therapist and patient, there is no such thing as a consensual sexual

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relationship. In every case it is considered sexual abuse, because the professor, doctor, lawyer, minister or therapist takes advantage of the position, the power and the trust to elicit sexual favors.

Think about it for a minute. Does anyone really believe that young Monica Lewinski, less than half the age of the greying and pudgy Bill Clinton, would actually be interested in him if he were not the President of the United States or in some other such highly visible and powerful position? And just like everyone else who has this kind of power, it is the president's responsibility to be sure that he doesn't abuse that power.

Sexual abuse is a serious charge, for it implies that at a certain level the person perpetrating the abuse violates the very core of his or her position. Rather than use the power given to him or her for the reason that it was given, the person uses it instead for personal gratification. And in the use of that power for that gratification, the other party is betrayed and abused, and the position mis-used and abused.

"If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it," Paul says. If we allow sexual abuse to be characterized as a personal matter between consenting adults, if we see it simply as a matter of personal morality, we allow behavior that ultimately makes us all a little less human. Even if we see it as a matter of character, which is closer to the truth, we still miss the force of the problem. The question isn't whether the president or anyone else can do their job and still have some character flaws. The president's relationship with Monica Lewinski and anyone else is a part of his job, and if he has committed an act of sexual abuse, he has shown himself incapable of doing the job.

I don't know if the president has done what he is suspected of doing. It would not be fair to judge him guilty prematurely, and like Kenneth Starr, I want to trust the process to get the truth out. But of one thing I am sure, this is no small thing. It is not a distraction from the real work of the presidency. It is not a matter of the president's personal life. Believing it to be so makes us all suffer. I pray that the alleged events are not true. But if they are, I pray we recognize them for what they are. Amen.