

"MEMBERS ONE OF ANOTHER"
October 7, 1990

TEXT: 1 Corinthians 12:12 "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."

Every Thursday, I meet with a group of men from this church for breakfast and discussion. Sometimes we talk about current events. Sometimes we talk about what is happening in our lives. And, sometimes, we talk about a book. Right now we are reading C. S. Lewis's The Screwtape Letters. It is not a new book, and some of us have read it before. But it is so full of insight that it is well worth reading again.

As some of you know, it contains what purport to be letters from one Screwtape, a senior demon, to his nephew, Wormwood, a junior tempter. In their alleged correspondence, Screwtape instructs Wormwood on the best ways to keep his human from becoming truly Christian. And one thing that stands out for me is Screwtape's constant stress on keeping the human centered in himself and critical of others.

That temptation to focus on self is one of the reasons I consider World Communion Sunday so important. This is a day when we stress oneness, not separateness. Today, Christians of all persuasions, and from all over the world, come together at our Lord's table: Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox; Liberals, Moderates, Conservatives. Today, more than any other time, we are a living expression of Paul's comment to the Romans: "So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. (Romans 12:5) And, as Screwtape so wisely understood, that is what the church is all about.

As a matter of fact, that is what all religion is about. Emile Durkheim, who spent years studying primitive religions came to the conclusion that religion's earliest function was not to put people in touch with God, but to put them in touch with each other.

Rituals, he said, taught them how to share the experiences of birth and bereavement, of children marrying and parents dying. In that way, people could share the most joyous and most frightening things in life. No one would ever have to face them alone. Or as St. Paul put it, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Corinthians 12:26)

I am convinced that all of us want that kind of community. That we not only want it, but need it. In her book, The Listener, Taylor Caldwell writes: "Man does not need to go to the moon or other solar systems. He does not require bigger and better bombs and missiles. He will not die if he does not get better housing or more vitamins . . . His basic needs are few, and it takes little to acquire them . . . He can survive on a small amount of bread and in the meanest shelter . . . His real need, his most terrible need, is for someone to listen to him, not as a patient; but as a human soul"

But the more sophisticated we become, the more we destroy the community which meets our needs. Destroy it by our own self-centeredness. The more sophisticated we become, the more we create our own little kind of hell. In T. S. Eliot's The Cocktail Party one of his characters laments, "Hell is oneself. Hell is alone, the other figures in it merely projections. There is nothing to escape from and nothing to escape to. One is always alone."

Christ came to save us from aloneness. To save us by calling us from our own sin. Or, if "sin" sounds too old-fashioned, just substitute the word, selfishness. It means the same thing. And, like sin, selfishness destroys. Destroys fellowship with God, and our community with others. The two relationships we all so desperately need.

Here are three ways Jesus in which teaches us to overcome selfishness. The first is by coming into contact with others. Without personal contact, there can be no community. But once we associate with others we get to know them. We discover that, in spite of differences, they are pretty much like us --a combination of good and bad. And the good almost always outweighs the bad.

Charles Lamb once said to a friend, "I hate that man!" "Do you know him?" his friend inquired. "Of course, not," Lamb replied. "If I did, I couldn't hate him." When we look at Jesus, we find he was never aloof. He ate with publicans and sinners. He talked with women and Samaritans. He blessed little children. He touched the blind and the lame, and even lepers. By his example he showed us how to create community.

A second way is to focus on the best in people, especially in those we do not like. No doubt they have their faults, and when we focus on their faults we back away from them. The way to build community is to concentrate on the good, not the bad. That is what Jesus did. He saw the good in Matthew, the tax collector, and called him as one of his disciples. He saw the good in Mary Magdalene and called her from degradation. He saw the good in Zacchaeus, and in the penitent thief. By his example he showed us how to create community.

And the third way is helping others. Helping creates an atmosphere of love and trust. And who was ever more helpful than

Jesus. He helped the man with the withered arm even though it gave his enemies a way to condemn him. He healed the deaf mute even though it interfered with his teaching. He helped ten lepers even though only one was grateful enough to thank him. By his example he showed us how to create community.

But we need more than Christ's example. We need His Spirit in our lives. And I have found that Spirit to be contagious when I come to his table honestly, expectantly, penitently. I pray that you will find it so, as well.