

Building the Body
Ephesians 4:4-14

It's the time of the year for New Year's Resolutions, and according to the Nielsen company, the most popular resolution at this time last year was to stay fit and healthy. The next most popular was to lose weight. That means this is the time of year when people are at least recognizing that they need to do some body building, whether or not they ever act on those good intentions.

But in today's passage we are reminded that there is another body to which all those who trust in Jesus Christ belong – the body of Christ. And right off the bat, Paul reminds us in verse 4 that there is only One Body, only One true church that exists all over the world and throughout time. The word we use to describe the universal nature of this Church is Catholic, and that's why we use that word in the Apostles' Creed.

And it is because there is only one body of Christ that one part of it can act for the whole Church – this is why John David could be baptized here, even though his parents are members of another congregation in another town. This is also why Dr. Penny, a PCA minister, can conduct a baptism here, in an EPC church. We know that all those who love and trust Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior belong to this one, universal, Catholic church.

And the sacrament we celebrated this morning also expresses our connection to this One Body, our connection to Christ. According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, Baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, and that's why it's especially appropriate that the children of believers receive this mark, this testimony to their belonging to the family of God. For where it comes to grace, we are all as helpless as infants. When we trust in Christ, we simply receive grace, the forgiveness and welcome that none of us deserve but that we all so desperately need.

Now, this doesn't of course mean that once a child is baptized, that's the end of the story. No, John David will one day need to respond to God's grace the same way that his parents and grandparents and great-grandparents have done, by putting his faith in Christ. As Paul says in verse 13, as he becomes a mature man, he will need to gain greater knowledge of the Son of God.

And how will he gain that knowledge? How will he grow in grace? Well, in verse 12, Paul explains God's plan for building up the whole body of Christ, and it involves another one of His gifts that we celebrate today – church leaders.

Now in verse 11 Paul mentions apostles and prophets, men who wrote and approved the writings that have come to be known as the Holy Scriptures. With the completion of the Bible, these offices are no longer necessary. Of course, we still have evangelists, pastors and teachers, and some denominations are structured so that there is only one pastor/teacher for each congregation.

But we Presbyterians do things differently – we have a group of elders that lead each congregation. The pastor, or teaching elder, is only one member of the session, which is made up of a majority of ruling elders. In fact, at least in part because of the teaching of the apostle Peter in our responsive reading, we believe that pastors and ruling elders have the same authority. After all, even though Peter reminds his readers that he is an apostle, an eyewitness of the suffering of Christ, he also calls himself an elder, just like those who led the congregations of the early Church.

And what did Peter tell those elders to do? To feed the flock that had been entrusted to their care. And that's really the same thing that Paul said pastors and teachers were to do, isn't it? He said that the leaders of the church were to build up the body of Christ to become more and more like Christ, helping all of us to grow toward greater unity of faith, toward greater knowledge of the Son of God.

And I think the nature of our task explains at least in part why more than one elder is needed for every congregation. Most obviously, having more than one elder multiplies the work that can be done. The pastor can't teach all the Sunday School classes – in fact because this pastor serves two congregations, I can't teach any of them. Moreover, the pastor isn't the only example for Christian living that the congregation needs. For instance, I can't show you how to live as a Christian husband and father – for that example, you have to look to those elders who have married and raised children, and we've seen some good examples today, haven't we?

So, as we begin a New Year, let's not just resolve to build up our physical bodies, although that's certainly a good thing to do. Let's resolve to use all of God's good gifts, all the means of grace by which God intends for the Body of Christ to be built up. Let's celebrate the sacraments, as we enjoyed the Lord's Supper last week, and as we witnessed a baptism this week. And let's celebrate the One Holy Catholic Church, the Body of Christ. Let's seek to learn more of the Church's teaching and to following the example of its leaders. And in that way, may we all experience more of the fullness of Christ in this new year.