

I read about a college football game that turned out to be a terrible mismatch. One team outweighed the other by thirty pounds per man, was more experienced, better coached, etc. The lighter, weaker team was being terribly beaten, not only on the scoreboard but also on their bodies. They were bruised and cut and bleeding and several first-stringers already had left the game because of injuries.

As they gathered around in their huddle late in the final period, the quarterback noticed that they had twelve men on the field, one more than the eleven allowed by the rules. If the referee discovered the extra man on the field he would assess a penalty, thereby adding to their already deep humiliation.

“Look,” the quarterback said to his teammates. “We’ll try a quick running play that will take us past our bench. As we pass the bench, I want one of you to try to discretely drop out. If we can do this fast enough, the referee may not notice and we can avoid a penalty.” Amidst great confusion, they succeeded in running the play right past their bench. However, when they returned to the huddle the quarterback discovered, to his amazement, that six men had dropped out.

I’m not sure if those football players were discouraged or, maybe, they were amazingly wise. After all, they were severely overmatched. So they removed themselves from the game.

Unfortunately, that sometimes happens in church. People get discouraged and they drop out. Or they simply get lazy and drop out. Or, perhaps, they get upset with the pastor and drop out.

Whatever the reason, whenever anyone from our community drops out, we are hurt in our ability to be all God means for us to be. We are deprived of the gifts we need to carry on our ministry.

By the time John arrived at the football game, the first quarter was almost over. "Why are you so late?" his friend asked.

"I had to flip a coin to decide between going to church and coming to the game," John answered.

"How long could that have taken you?" "Well," said John, "I had to flip it 23 times."

Some people seem to think that we flip enough coins or can rationalize an excuse, we can take day off and it won't really matter anyway. But it does matter.

Nehemiah in that first reading tells the Israelites not to weep and moan after he read them the law. Yes, it puts some restrictions on your lives but it also makes clear what you should be doing and gives you some motivation to do it. So we have laws that say you should attend mass every weekend but that's not the only reason to be involved in your faith community. Paul gives us the best reason in his letter to the Corinthians.

The church was not born full grown. It needed to grow in its self-understanding. What was the church? How should its life be shaped? There was no shortage of models from which these early Christians could draw.

For example, they could have patterned their church life after the Temple. They loved the Temple. It was the place of worship. But they didn't because the Temple was set up to exclude people. Or they could have patterned themselves after the Synagogue.

Synagogues were more informal places where people gathered to read, hear and discuss the Scriptures. But that could get pretty self-focused, maybe a bit too abstract.

There were other possibilities for the church to pattern itself after, but each had its limitations. Throughout scripture, there are other word-pictures about what the church should be: a field; a building; a bride. In each of these comparisons, the church is “like” this, or “like” that. But in this passage, Paul says the church *is* the body of Christ. Not “like” the body of Christ. We *are* the body of Christ. And we can’t afford to take any part of the body for granted; we are unified whole with many parts dependent on one another.

You may remember a few years ago when Snoopy, the loveable beagle in the *Peanuts* cartoon, had his broken left leg. Hundreds of people wrote letters to Snoopy or sent sympathy cards. Snoopy himself philosophized about his plight one day while perched on top of his doghouse and looking at the huge white cast on his leg.

“My body blames my foot for not being able to go places,” he says. “My foot says it was my head’s fault, and my head blames my eyes . . . My eyes say my feet are clumsy, and my right foot says not to blame him for what my left foot did . . .” Snoopy looks out at his audience and confesses, “I don’t say anything because I don’t want to get involved.”

There are too many people who don’t want to get involved. They want only a nominal relationship with the church. Spiritually, however, that’s not possible. Casual attendance at worship is not enough.

Your church needs your service. The fact that you are a member of the church means that your gifts are needed-- your abilities, your talents. And, it's not enough to occasionally or even weekly occupy a pew. Whatever it is God has called you to do is something we need and no gift is unimportant.

In March of 1981, President Ronald Reagan was shot by John Hinckley, Jr., and was hospitalized for several weeks. Although Reagan was the nation's chief executive, his hospitalization had little impact on the nation's activity. Government continued on.

On the other hand, suppose the garbage collectors in this country went on strike, as they did some time back in Philadelphia. That city was not only in a literal mess, the pile of decaying trash quickly became a health hazard. Suppose that happened throughout the whole country. A nationwide strike of several weeks would paralyze the country. "Who is more important - a President or a garbage collector?" Each person's service matters.

Once there was community of ducks. Each Sunday these ducks would waddle off to duck church to hear the duck preacher. The duck preacher would speak eloquently and passionately about how God has given the ducks a special gift. The gift was wings with which to fly. With these wings, the duck preacher would assure them, there is nowhere ducks cannot go. With those wings there is no God-given task the ducks cannot accomplish. With those wings they can soar into the very presence of God.

As the duck preacher exhorted his duck congregation, shouts of "Amen!" were quacked throughout the congregation. Wings were lifted in praise.

And, then, at the conclusion of the service, the ducks left the gathering place, commenting on what a wonderful message they had heard. And each of the ducks quietly waddled their way back home. They did not use their gift at all.

St. Theresa talks about our gifts and our service this way: “Christ has no body now but yours . . . No hands, no feet on earth but yours . . . Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world . . . Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good . . . Yours are the hands with which He blesses all the world . . . Yours are the hands . . . Yours are the feet . . . Yours are the eyes . . . You are His body.” You are his body. You are the hope of the world. It’s time for us to lift up our wings and fly.