Since we are Episcopalian I assume that most of you have not paid much attention to the Methodist Church, well… that is about to change…but just for a minute and then you can go back to ignoring them. Let me give you a quick summary of developments in the Methodist Church over the past year. Every year the Methodist Church has the equivalent of what we call General Convention, but because of differences in polity, all Methodists, regardless of their home country, come to this meeting. This past February the Methodists had one of these meetings where the topic of same sex marriage was debated and a vote was taken on the subject. The resolution that passed basically said that there could be no same sex weddings in the Methodist Church nor could there be non-celibate gay clergy. Speaking in fairly broad terms the conservative voices, that is those who opposed same-sex marriages, came from largely outside the United States and the liberal voices came largely from inside the United States. As soon as this vote occurred a movement began by the liberal side to split the Methodist Church within the United States. At the beginning of this month a plan was put forth that would create two Methodist denominations in the United States and this plan was praised by both sides in the debate. Jan Lawrence, executive director of the Reconciling Ministries Network, a pro-LGBT group within the church, said the separation plan “gives the hope that we can move toward a church that allows healing to begin.” While The Rev. Thomas A. Lambrecht, vice president of the conservative Methodist organization Good News, also praised the plan saying, “We believed that separation was the only feasible way of resolving our conflict in the church and allowing different groups in the church to pursue ministry as they believe coincides with their understanding of the Christian faith.” And when compared to the dog’s breakfast that we Episcopalians have made in our debate over the same issue, this does seem better – it seems that there will be no lawsuits, taking of property, elimination of pensions nor a massive amount of new acronyms. But here is the question I have, is this separation something that makes God happy? That is does God look down and say, “Look how nice they are being about not being able to be in the same church as people with whom they disagree; that’s why I sent my Son.” I don’t think that the old camp song says they will know we are Christians by our division. But let’s also think about this in terms of what we hear from Paul today. He says, “Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’ Has Christ been divided?” And that is a question all of us need to ask, not just Methodists – Has Christ been divided?

Just for a little fun trivia let me tell you something about being a chaplain in the Air Force. In order to be a chaplain, one has to be endorsed by a religious organization recognized by the Department of Defense. In my case, I am endorsed by The Episcopal Diocese of the Armed Services and Federal Ministries. Now for the trivia: Does anyone want to take a guess at how many authorized endorsing agencies there are for the Department of Defense? That is how many ways can you be a chaplain in the U.S Air Force? Well, there is one endorsing agency for Jewish Rabbis, one for Muslim Imams and one for Buddhist Priests, and then a mere 215 for us Christians. That’s a lot of dividing up of Christ. I mean a fully-grown human only has 206 to 208 bones, so I’m not even sure if there is any Jesus left to be divided. So what’s wrong with us Christians? Why are we so eager to make one more division of Christ’s body?

Before I answer this I want to say that I do not want this to be a discussion of who is right and who is wrong. That is, I don’t want to answer who is right in the Methodist split. And for that matter I am not going to answer if the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Michael I Cerularius was right in excommunicating Cardinal Humbert of Silva Candida, in 1054 kicking off the great schism which separated the Roman Catholics and the Greek Orthodox. I have thoughts and views about who is right and wrong in many of these disputes but that does not answer the question of why we can’t settle disputes in unity but rather feel that division is the only answer. And so what I rather want to concentrate on is the question of: If we are all one body in Christ, why do we have so many bodies.

I once heard a marriage counselor say that every argument in marriage comes down to the one argument, which is, “Why can’t you be more like me.” I think this statement may also go a long way towards explaining why we fracture Christ’s body so much. Our disputes become very focused on ourselves. Think about a marital fight, unhealthy ones are the ones where spouses cease viewing the others as human and instead see the others worth measured only by what they do or do not do. That is they judge their spouse in the same way we might evaluate a car or a new dishwasher, seeing the others worth strictly as a function of what they do. There is a word for this, objectification, that is treating people like tools or toys, as if they had no feelings, opinions, or rights of their own. And I think this can be much the case in church splits we find people only worthwhile when they have beliefs that align with ours.

Now there are two ways not to objectify people. The first is to not care about what they believe and do. The second and much more difficult one is to care about what others think and do, while never losing sight that they also are created in the image of God and have all the frailties that we have. Calling someone a heretic and cutting them off from our life is not very hard. Continuing to be in relationship with someone with whom we disagree is hard and we have 215 soon to be 216 different endorsing agencies in the military because a lot of people took the easy route.

So let’s return to where all of this started the dividing of Christ’s body. This happens when we confuse ourselves with what is most important. We forget that Jesus is the most important thing and the only person that has the power to provide unity. And please do not think that I am saying that you can believe whatever you want and be a Christian, but what I am saying is that we need to approach those with whom we disagree with love and charity, never losing sight of the cross. Schism is not glorifying to God no matter how nice we are about it. As Jesus says in Matthew, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven…For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” Being Christian is about the hard love. It is about loving those whom we feel like we have good reason not to love. It is ultimately about submitting everything to Jesus, which really means that there can be no division, because that which unites us is stronger than anything that divides us. For we are called to imitate the love that God has for all of his creation as shown in Christ dying for us on the cross so that we may be God’s own living in his love and unity this day and forevermore.