It hasn’t been a great summer for us. It hasn’t been a great summer for our nation. When it comes to
the fairly significant question of whether or not humanity will be able to survive in a world stocked with
nuclear weapons it appears that for the first time in more than 50 years the president of the United States is
seriously considering using nuclear weapons in a foolish attempt to solve a long-standing political problem.
Here in the United States more and more parts of our nation are experiencing the negative affects of the
changing climate. 2017 has been hot, the second hottest year so far behind 2016. Even before considering
the devastating effects of Hurricane Harvey, flooding from torrential rains in the southeastern U.S. has been
bad again this year, exactly as scientists predicted would happen 10 or 20 years ago.

And the difficulties are not just outside of us, they are inside of us. There is palpable, even physical,
conflict between those who want to come to terms with the evils of racism and those who look back with
pride at a time of legal and widespread racial oppression and discrimination. Most worrisome of all, the
institutions and structures that are essential for the strength of our democracy are under attack. Our
democracy is one of the best tools we have to solve all of these other problems.

Yet the right to vote has been curtailed in many states. Our president is demanding that the United
States Senate end the use of a sixty vote requirement for legislation, which would only increase the
polarization of our political parties. Our schools and universities are constantly subject to cynical attacks
and cuts in their funding. Those who spend their lives as journalists, working to tell the story of what is
happening in our nation, have been viciously slandered by those who describe them as ‘enemies of the
people’ or as people who ‘don’t love this country’. In the darkest corners of our imagination we are
beginning to see the danger of something we had never thought would be possible for us: a 21st century
civil war in America. As a nation, we are in trouble and we know it.

As families and as individuals we also know we are in trouble. We know we are in trouble,
especially because of what we see happening with our young adults. At the very time in life when they
would seem to be the strongest our young men and women are hurting themselves. Among our Sudanese
members we see some of our 19 and 20 year olds moving out of their homes, becoming homeless and using
drugs and alcohol. In the rest of our community we see an alarming increase in the rates at which our young
women are cutting themselves and our young men are falling victim to suicide. As families and as
individuals we know we are in trouble.

I am going to go out on a limb and tell you that in my understanding there is only one way forward,
there is only one way for us to survive and flourish; it is called community. When I talk about the
importance of community you may think that I am borrowing an idea from Saul Alinsky or from the
community organizing movement of the 20th century, but that is actually backwards. All of the community
organizing people who know what they are doing are borrowing most of their ideas from us, from the Jesus
movement and from this man we call St. Paul.

When St. Paul talks about community he talks about the congregation being a single unified body.
Here in Romans and in 1 Corinthians Paul describes the community of followers of Christ as the body of
Christ. What could it mean for the church to be the body of Christ? What do you think?

It is perhaps the greatest irony for Christians in America that, thanks to the lack of good theological
education on the part of a 16th century Spanish explorer, we have a city in Texas named Corpus Christi,
which is latin for body of Christ. For some strange reason which goes to heart of the grand
misunderstanding of what it means to follow Christ, we have actually had at least three American warships
that have been named after the city of Corpus Christi. Don’t get me wrong. I think very highly of our
sailors and the highly disciplined and truly helpful way the United States Navy has helped to make the
world a better, and often a more peaceful place, in many instances in the history of our nation. But the body
of Christ is not a good name for a warship. It is only a good name for one thing: a group of people. It is a
good name for a group of people who are trying to act like they were created in the image of God.
Here in the letter to the Romans Paul says, *For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.* This was a difficult idea for Paul’s people to understand and it is a difficult idea for us to understand. Individually we are members of one another. When we act as a true community; we, who are many, are one body, united in Christ.

Here and many other places in his letters, Paul keeps pushing on this idea of community, he keeps pushing on the idea of unity precisely because all of those people in the ancient world were having the exact same sorts of problems we are having today. Paul intentionally uses this word ‘body’ over and over again because, just as is the case today, people in Paul’s time and in Paul’s congregations were obsessed with their physical bodies. They were totally preoccupied with the idea of self-control and the triumph of the individual.

As we continue our obsession with our glorious individual selves Paul says, ‘Give it up. That’s not going to work!’ *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,* *by the mercies of God,* *to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,* *which is your spiritual worship.* This life we are living, it is not about individual triumph. This is not about yourself as an individual, as a lone, perfectly self-controlled body. So present yourself to God, try to be spiritually connected to God. *For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment.* Paul is not talking about refraining from alcohol when he talks about sober judgment. Paul is saying, ‘use your mind. Use this incredible mind, this power to reason God has given you.’ Be reasonable. Somewhere deep inside your brain you know you are not better than other people.

For Paul’s people and for us, this is the sickness: we imagine we are separate from all of these other people. We think that somehow we are not connected. Sometimes we think we are better than other people. We do not see that we, and all of these other people are created in God’s image. For Paul’s people and for us, this blindness will lead to the end of our nation, the end of our children, the end of us.

My favorite reader of Paul’s letter to the Romans is Stanley Stowers. Mr. Stowers has a powerful explanation for what Paul is talking about when Paul uses the phrase, ‘one body in Christ’. The idea starts with Jesus. Jesus became known as the Christ, in other words, as the anointed one of God and from God, because in the teachings and life and death and resurrection of Christ, Jesus revealed God’s union with people. Christ Jesus reconciled God to humankind. In Stowers words: *Christ revealed God’s adaptability to the real situation of God’s people. So we, the people of God, act as a true community,* we act as the body of Christ in the world, when we demonstrate these same qualities: adaptability, connection, reconciliation and unity.

For us, there is only one way to live. We must somehow adapt ourselves to each other the way God adapted to us. We must somehow find a way to reconcile with each other, the way God reconciled Godself to us. We must somehow be united with God and be united with each other.

Good luck to you and good luck to us! It is going to take some serious work for us to raise our children so they understand they are completely connected, like one body, with us and with other people. It is going to take some serious work for those who voted for Mr. Trump and those who voted for Mrs. Clinton to be reconciled with one another. It is going to take a miracle of work for the people of South Sudan to become united, somehow after 50 years of civil war, with the people of Sudan.

We know the way forward. It is so much work. It always has been. There is a place where we help each other do the work: it’s called the church. The church is the only place where Paul’s words are called holy. So hold my hand. Hold each others’ hands. Let’s get to work.