

"THE BODY NEEDS YOU"

THE EPISTLE LESSON

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

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.

For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body.

And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body.

If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.

If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.

Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

But strive for the greater gifts.

As a child, I loved playing the piano. I sat for hours, playing glorious music that flowed from my fingers to the keys singing along at the top of my lungs. Then I started taking lessons. The music didn't flow quite so easily once they told me I had to hit certain keys, but I still loved playing. Until the day the middle C key stopped working. My mother did not understand the problem, or maybe we couldn't afford to get it fixed. She insisted I keep on practicing every day anyway. I hated it. I hated that awful thunk every time I hit middle C.

A few years ago, as I sat down one Saturday morning to write my sermon for the next day, I spilled an entire mug of freshly made cappuccino across my laptop. Although I did what I could to save it, I was too impatient and I left the Z key permanently disabled. Now, for those of you who don't use computers on a regular basis, you might think that's not too bad. After all, how often do we use words with Z in them? But let me tell you about this wonderful key combination that uses the Z and one other key. It's "Undo last command." If you make a mistake, all you have to do is hit those two keys, and you've corrected your mistake. You can go back 10, even 20 commands to a mistake you made long before. (Wouldn't it be wonderful if the rest of life had that option?) I make lots of mistakes, which means it drove me crazy not to have a Z key.

It's Paul's letter to the Corinthians that started me thinking about those missing keys. They were essential. I couldn't say to middle C, or Z, "I have no need of you."

Today's passage is one of my favorites, one that has formed much of what I believe about the nature of the church. In Divinity School, I used it for my final New Testament Interpretation project. For me, at that time, there were three themes of great importance.

The first theme was literal. I know Paul's letter isn't literal, the way Jesus looks is important. One day, when a fellow student walked into the room, I thought, "Wow, he's really got a Jesus look going here." I realized had to look at my long-held assumptions about Jesus. My classmate was tall, blue-eyed, and white. He had long, wavy brown hair parted in the middle, and a neat beard. Just like the Jesus on the wall in practically every North American church starting in the 1950s. I know you've seen it, and maybe even still have one around here somewhere. We know Jesus probably didn't look like that, but the image sticks. Artists in the rest of the world depict Jesus as looking just like they do. I collected pictures of Jesus as an Indonesian in t-shirt and shorts, a wide-eyed Ethiopian, a Congolese with an afro, a Korean with a tall black hat and pointy beard, and one on a pierogi.

But knowing Paul isn't taking about the physical being of Christ, but rather about the church as the body of Christ, I went on to ask: "What does the body of Christ look like in churches?" I collected pictures of church bodies celebrating Jesus Christ with high-church pageantry, Caribbean exuberance, youthful enthusiasm, low budget simplicity, and with Protestant restraint. The Body of Christ as lived out in the church doesn't always look like us, sing like us, or believe like us. If the image of Christ can be so diverse, so can the members of Christ's body.

Paul had no way of knowing how diverse the body of Christ would eventually be. He only knew the local church at Corinth was having difficulties. Some of the members were getting a bit too big for their britches and were strutting around like they were better than everyone else. Paul reminds them that they are each just one member, and they need each other. The eyes can't do without the hands and the head can't do without the feet. The lungs can't do without the nose hairs, and the ears can't do without the earwax.

I love Paul. I love him for his concern for the body of Christ, its diversity, its inclusivity, and its upbuilding. That brings me to the third theme. How wonderful that the church is a collection of teachers, hands, feet, prophets, fixers, heads, fingernails, healers, pew-sitters, and treat bakers. I want, as Paul wants, for each person who wanders into the circle of the church community to know they are welcome, valuable, respected, and cherished. I want church to be a place where any person can come and know their true worth as beloved and gifted children of God. I want the church to be a place of radical inclusivity and hospitality.

I still want all that passionately. But this week Paul's letter to the Corinthians stirred up other thoughts. In the past few weeks, I've been exploring what I believe about church membership. All along, I've been thinking about it as welcoming those people who haven't known what it means to be part of a loving and generous church community. Or those who have been burned by a church like the one in Corinth, a church that made them feel unwanted, un-cared for, too different, or too heretical.

But what about those who do know what it means, and choose not to be active members? Those who consider themselves members but who say to the church, "I have no need of you," or even, "I have no need of you right now." Those who say "I'm spiritual, not religious." Or, "I can see God in a sunset, I don't need to go to church." Rev. Lillian Daniel, a pastor in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, responds to that with: "Well, excuse me, as if people who go to church didn't see God in a sunset. You know, my take is that any idiot can find God in the sunset. What is remarkable is finding God in the context of flawed human community, and a tradition bigger than you are with people who may not reflect God back to you in your own image.

Community isn't easy. The people of Corinth knew that, Paul knew that, we know that. But that's what it means to be part of the body of Christ—to practice our faith in community over time, through the easy and not so easy times, worshiping, serving, loving, and enduring. Together.

The body of Christ can't function if its members aren't here to share in the fact that "if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." And if one member is missing, the whole body suffers. My old piano had 88 keys, and 87 of them worked. But I missed that middle C. My coffee-drenched laptop had 78 keys, and 77 of them worked, yet I missed that Z.

In some ways, I'm preaching to the wrong people. You are the faithful ones who make this church function. But in another way, I am talking about you too.

Christmas Eve was a delight. We had 94 people in this sanctuary. I'm new here, and there were many faces I didn't recognize—extended family, friends, former members, and acquaintances of the church. The energy was high, and it was a joy to see so many people here, gathered to celebrate the birth of Christ.

But I caught myself feeling a little sad as I looked out at those unfamiliar faces. Too many of you who sit here week after week enduring extra long services, tolerating my changes to the liturgy, Yawning through my sermons, and pretending to sing the hymns I pick weren't here. (Or were here and hidden, sitting somewhere in the back.) This is not a criticism or a judgment—sometimes you just can't be in church and the holidays are complicated. What I am saying is that I missed you. We missed you. Terribly. 94 people were here, but you are the members of the body of Christ as it is embodied at Allwood Community Church. Those of you who were sick or who had other obligations were missed.

The same goes for times when you are sick, away, away on vacation, sleeping in, trying to catch up on stuff, out helping someone, or whatever it is that people do on Sunday mornings. The body of Christ, and the body of Christ at Allwood are diminished when you are not here to celebrate, work, eat, and share with us. We want to suffer with you, and rejoice with you.

If you remember nothing else of what I say today, remember this. The body needs you. Amen.