

Sermon for August 20, 2023—“We Are The Body of Christ”

Twentieth Sunday in OT, Year A—Texts: Romans 12:1-13; 1 Corinthians 12:4-30

The Apostle Paul, despite his frequent inability to use punctuation, was an inspired writer and a brilliant preacher. And while I don't know what exactly gave him the idea to compare the church to a body, I have a strong hunch that it came directly from God. It is a brilliant metaphor—something we can all relate to and understand; because each of us has a body. Although I am guessing most of us take that for granted a good deal of the time.

Most days I don't get out of bed and give thanks for my spleen or my femur. Which is mostly fine—Lord knows they don't need me to be aware of them to do their thing. Despite this, or maybe because of it, we put a lot of stock into being whole. We are distressed by and for people who are missing limbs or suffering from too much or too little of a body part or system. We seem to be wired for wholeness—the desire for it is deep within us.

What Paul was trying to teach the early churches was that what was true inside their skin was also true outside it. That wholeness was a matter of many different parts all being themselves and doing their jobs. In other words, unity and diversity were not contradictory terms. They were two true words for our paradoxical reality, namely that our survival depends not on our sameness but on our infinite variety. This is something, as we've talked about before, that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. knew deep in his bones.

While history has tended to separate King from his religious faith and turn him into simply a crusader for civil rights, it is impossible to separate King from his religion. It was because he was steeped in, believed in the Gospel of Jesus, because he was a student of Paul, that he preached non-violence and worked so tirelessly not just for racial justice but also fought against poverty and war.

It was because he shared God's dream of a beloved community—one in which every part is valuable, deserving of dignity and justice and where reconciliation is the way of life. One in which every person is part of the body, the body not just of the church, but of humanity.

Now, Paul's body metaphor is all well and good when we are talking about elbows and eyeballs, but is quite a bit more challenging when we are talking about community, both within and without the church. When we're talking about a bunch of people who look, think, talk, smell, and act differently than me.

One person is relentlessly optimistic and happy no matter what, one has been shaped by life to see the gloom in any situation or person. One is a fierce warrior for social justice making everyone around her feel like a slacker. Another puts on a loud prayer show but gossips something fierce and isn't above spreading lies around. But, Paul says, “You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

At heart we don't seem to handle the wide variety we encounter outside our bodies as we do inside. We are generally not thrilled when others challenge our accepted routines. Or when others feel the need to give us all sorts of unsolicited advice. Or when others have a view of the world that is vastly different to ours, even offensive to us. It's all so puzzling.

You join a community. And you're looking for, what? Closeness? Support? Safety? Affirmation? Instead you get a holy struggle to live and work with people who are just as angular as you are. The brains want everyone to act like brains and the hearts want everyone to act like hearts and there is always a hangnail who brings out the hangnail in everyone else.

Parker Palmer, in his wonderful book, *The Company of Strangers*, writes that community is "that place where the person you least want to live with always lives. And when that person moves away someone else always arrives to fill the empty place." It seems we all carry some romantic notion of community—the idea that community is where we can hide out with a bunch of people who are just like us.

But the real purpose, at least the Christian purpose, of community is for it to be a place where we give ourselves up to the workings of the Spirit by learning how to live with people who aren't just not exactly like us, but people we may not like at all. It seems that the way to open ourselves up to the God who is beyond our knowing, the way to beloved community, is to start small—with the neighbor who is beyond our knowing. What better way to learn about the reconciling power of Christ than to test it in a body of infinite variety.

And as brilliant as Paul was with a metaphor, I am not convinced that is what he is doing here. He is not saying you are "like" the body of Christ, he is saying you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." Paul is saying whether you like it or not, whether you are aware of it or not, you are the body of Christ and the only question is whether you will act like it or not.

One of the most critical scientific discoveries of recent years is the discovery of subatomic reality which, among many other things, asserts that the universe itself operates much more like a body—each part affected by and in relationship with each other part—than like a clock where each part does its own separate thing.

Deep in our bones, deep in the quantum reaches of the universe, we are interrelated. In fact, scientists discovered that the very act of observing even an electron causes it to change its behavior—electrons are at the core of, are part of this unfathomable web of relationship. So whenever a baby yawns or a butterfly moves its wings the entire web shifts to accommodate it. Scientists call this chaos theory, Paul called it the Body of Christ, and Dr. King called it—again, as we've talked about before—the "Beloved Community," that great mystery of God which binds us together whether we're aware of it or not, whether we like it or not, or whether we feel it or not.

And if Paul is right—if what he said is true—then this is both wonderful and challenging news. Because everyone, everyone we encounter, see on the news, is as much part of my own body as my arteries. And any time we try to point out a person or group of people and say they are separate, we are doing damage to the body. This is extraordinarily difficult. But any time we draw a line we simply become one more person who is convinced that there are some people who cannot belong to the body. We actually become part of the problem. And if what Paul said is true then the fact is that God is not hanging out waiting for us to decide who is part of the body and who is not—who is in and who is out.

Wherever anyone laughs, cries, lives, or dies in this web of creation we are all affected by it, whether we know it or not. When one suffers, we all suffer and when one is honored all the rest of us rejoice. If only way down deep in Christ's bones where only he knows it is happening at all. Most of the time we go through life as if this was a sweet, fond illusion—but there is a definite possibility that it is our separateness which is the illusion.

While I am loathe to boil down Paul's message or King's message to one thing—I think this is it—and here, brothers and sisters—is the thing: Separateness is an illusion. We are all part of one Creation. We are all beloved—those we like and those we don't, those who are the same color as us and those who are not, those who are the same religion as us and those who are not, those who are the same political party as us, and those who are not. We are all beloved of God and in God we are all connected, we are all kin—just different parts of one body.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. May we discover which part we are. May we know it, feel it, believe it, and live it.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.