

“OUR LEAST FAVORITE BODY PARTS”
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21
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Our lesson this morning from the 12th chapter of 1 Corinthians is one of the most beloved texts of the progressive church. It’s a great text for both adults and children. I remember doing my first Vacation Bible School ever at my church in Seattle. Outside, on a large patio, we had drawn a huge chalk outline of a body and invited about 70 children—grades 1 through 5—to take their places on the part of Christ’s body they would want to be. There were understandable clumps of children around the heart and hands and feet and, being the liberal intellectuals that we are, even as children, a clump around the brain. But then a group of about five 3rd and 4th grade boys all decided they wanted to be the right elbow of the body, and there ensued pushing and shoving, and yes, even elbowing in a less than friendly way. And then a bunch of the girls decided they didn’t want to share their place as Christ’s eyes with the boys. It had been their idea first, and the boys were cheating. At that point the adults stepped in and talked about all being in this together, but the children were past listening. Now we had tears and more pushing and shoving, and young ones walking away in disinterest. Whatever we had originally planned to do further with the children and the body was wisely given up in favor of snack time. Ah, Christian love and charity. Isn’t it a wonderful thing_ More about that later.

But we do love this text. It is so richly visual, celebrating diversity, letting us all be different, with various gifts and abilities, and all of us essential to the body whether we are a hand or a mouth or a right toe or a stomach or a left eyebrow. All of us work together as a harmonious whole to make up the body of Christ. It’s a lovely easy image of the church. And that’s its problem. This “all parts of the body together” image of church life is too easy to be real. It is too easy with it to create in our minds a fictional, highly sentimentalized institution instead of the real church we know. Think about if we grown-up Christians—all of us of one congregation, or all Christians everywhere—if we were all at adult vacation Bible school, do you think we would all move out on to the big chalk drawing of the body and stand there together, all smiling at our places, with no pushing or shoving or hard words or conflict? My guess is that, unlike children, the problems that arose as we tried seriously to be the body together wouldn’t even be solved by moving to the picnic tables for juice boxes and graham crackers together.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to the church in Corinth when they were undergoing a terrible conflict. The community was falling apart at the seams with each faction insisting that they represented the true way of discipleship, the best qualities, the most insightful— if not the only—way to approach being Christ’s true body. They did not want to even begin to share the church with those they felt to be their inferiors—Paul’s less respectable members of the body, essential nonetheless. Does any of this sound familiar to you, ring any bells, move you to ponder your relationships within the wider church?

To help you out, let me ask you some questions. Think back on all the churches of which you have been a part in your life. Be honest here. In any of those churches, were there

members you didn't want to work with because they made you crazy,;or didn't want to do Bible study with because you found their comments on the Bible to be less than helpful; didn't want to make ministry decisions with because you didn't share their priorities or politics; didn't even want to stand next to and chat with at coffee hour because, well, because you didn't like them much and you'd be just as happy if they decided they wanted to be Presbyterians? In your life experience in the church, have you encountered at least one such person—maybe even more. . . ?

And when you look out there at the church throughout the world, are there groups and denominations with whom you would rather not be one body? Maybe it's Mormons, or conservative evangelicals, or old school Catholics, or all of the above and more. When Paul is talking about us all being the body of Christ together, that's what he's talking about, being part of the body with those guys, the ones we don't want to be with, and saying they are just as essential to the church as you are, as we are. He's admonishing us that we have as many lessons to learn from them about discipleship as they have from us. OK. I don't know about you all. Maybe you are of a more charitable bent than I, but I find this difficult. Really difficult. Right now, for example, the one Christian I'm having the hardest time with—my least favorite body part—is Pat Robertson. I've never much cared for his theology and since his pronouncement about Haiti making a deal with the devil and bringing this devastating earthquake on themselves, I have been outright incensed by him. Honestly, I don't want to be part of any body of which he is a part. I don't want to share the church with him. Personally, I'm not sure I want to share the planet with him. And yet here, this week, as I have been full of my self-righteous anger at the man, I have also had to deal with this body of Christ text that tells me he is part of me and I of him. Both of us serve the Christ we love. Both of us have positive contributions to make to the whole body of faith. Ouch!

That's what it really means to honor the whole body of Christ, not just that you can sew, and you understand the mysteries of plumbing, and I can cook. To share the church with those with whom we are in fundamental disagreement, those we don't even want to accord respect, it is a challenge, a huge theological leap. Are you ready and willing to go there? Because it is in that direction that Paul is pointing us. That is the hard work, the true work, of honoring diversity. And if we can't do it in the church, why are we surprised we can't do it in the world.

I am not generally inclined to quote 19th century poets, but I have a minister friend in Seattle who, under the protective glass top of her desk, keeps quotes she finds inspirational. One of them is from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Longfellow writes, "If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each person's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility."

If we are to truly try to be the Body of Christ with Christians with whom we profoundly disagree, this is the only starting point I can think of, because what we tend to do to those with whom we disagree is to turn them into caricatures, not people. We don't think about their struggles or their sorrows. We don't trouble to find out how they came to believe what they believe. We don't know where they doubt or find themselves vulnerable. We

have not looked for our points of connection, only—speaking for myself—wallowed self-righteously in our points of disconnection.

Says Paul to the church, “As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, I have not need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.’ What would it mean for us progressive Christians, we defenders of diversity, to look at the Christians with whom we most disagree, starting from a point of our shared humanity and our shared desire to serve the God we know through Jesus Christ. What if we were to relate to them starting from the place of asking, “Who are you? Tell me your faith journey. Help me to see what do I/we need to learn from you.” Not where do we disagree, not where do you make me crazy, but who are you as a person and what does your faith have to teach me, you who are as human as I am, as fallible as I am, as vulnerable as I am, and as serious a disciple of Jesus as I am. What would happen if we did that? How would the body of Christ be changed? How would it be healed? How would we be changed and healed?

I don’t believe that there is anything harder to do than to begin and maintain respectful dialogue with those from whom we are different, many of whose ideas we do not honor or support in any way, those whom we assume find us equally deficient. However, this is the work we are called to do in the church, the whole church. It’s not easy; it’s not sentimental; and only God knows how long it would take for such conversation to be fruitful. But we are the ones who love this body of Christ image, this call that we each have our place, that though we can’t necessarily see the logic in it, we are in this body together and need each other. So I believe it is up to us to reach out first. Maybe we, this church, could find a conservative church in Corvallis with whom we could partner in dialogue about a shared mission project, some work we could do side by side and get to know each other as human beings and as fellow Christians. Maybe the progressive ministers’ group could invite the conservative ministers’ group in town for a joint meeting to seek avenues of cooperation. Maybe. . .maybe. . .The opportunities are there if we truly want to find them. And God knows, maybe even one day, on break from this adult vacation Bible school we call life, someone like Pat Robertson and someone like me could sit down together with juice boxes and graham crackers and share our vulnerabilities and doubts, our celebrations in faith. Such a meal would truly be Holy Communion. Thanks be to God. Amen.

