

Unity in the Body of Christ
January 23, 2022
First Presbyterian Church of Kankakee
1 Corinthians 12: 12-30

I have learned in the past year of regularly worshipping with you all, that you are very proud of this church. And rightfully so. For it is here that people have been married, here people have been buried, baptized, prayed for and nurtured towards Christ. This church is a testament to faith in Jesus Christ. It is beautiful in its design. The windows, the woodwork, the pageantry of it all. And yet, it is nothing without you all. It is a building. A pretty building. Without you it is but bones and brick and mortar. It is merely an instrument that says something of those who built it, but not much of the people inside it. The history of the building is unique and special but it is not the building that matters. It is you that matters. For the building itself could never say enough about who you are. You all are the church. You are the body of Christ. Not this building.

Today we examine this metaphor of Paul – the body of Christ, our bodies, and the church body as one. Unity in its whole. Unity as perfected in Christ. The body of Christ is extremely important for the church corporate and for us personally. For it is a statement about personhood, a testimony of who Christ is, and what the world is, and who we are meant to be. It is body politics and body politics are not limited to the social sphere but are ever present in the church life.

I actually teach this passage at my work. It is a challenging passage when addressing issues of the body itself. For we are a violent people toward our bodies. If we look around us, the media, most specifically social media, would have us believe that we are not good enough, not pretty enough, not fit enough. We are bombarded with advertisements that encourage New Years resolutions, all the while knowing that the percentage of maintaining resolutions is very small. We make these resolutions to convince ourselves that we can do, we can change, that we can heal. All the while, the message remains that we are not enough. That there is always something wrong with us, always something that must be

worked on or perfected in some way. It's simply untrue. Companies profit off of our dissatisfaction with our bodies. Weight Watchers may try to disguise itself through its catchy new logo and name WW, but we all know who they are and what they are trying to do. Noom may say that they are not about weight loss but about psychology and yet, what is the goal – weight loss. And yes, they may have a smidge more psychology than other dieting programs but not enough to reclassify them into a mode of therapy. We are in fact incredibly hard on ourselves. And it's not that you have to engage in dramatic or large scale behavior to show this to be true. There's no need to engaging in cutting or self-abuse to prove my point. Think about how often you step on the scale or look at a body part, your hands even, and judge them as ugly or misshapen. Or when you think back to your younger years and remember things you did to “fit in” or improve your body. A staff person, through her laughter at herself, told me how she and her friends would not eat before they were weighed in at their prenatal exams because they didn't want to be “too heavy.” Pregnant and fearful of being too heavy. Or remember those fabulous grapefruit diets. We are hard on ourselves and our bodies because we cannot overcome our bodies.

And Paul tells us that our bodies are actually not be overcome, because our bodies are testaments to Christ in the world. These bodies that we have are good, no matter our age. The risk in Christianity is that we will seek out homogeneity, similarities, affirmations of ourselves in others. And this is a shame because as Paul points out all the parts of ourselves are valid, and important and good. The church is one in diversity. We were not all meant to be the same. We were meant for difference. And yet, how does the center hold in the midst of difference?

It is not holding well after all. Our society is very divided and those divisions define us more than our unity. In this time of pandemic we have learned many lessons. Now, learning lessons is not the same things as learning from our lessons. Two extremely important lessons that have emerged from the pandemic are that this is the worst Apocalypse ever – just kidding. It isn't the Apocalypse apparently –

but its so slow, it doesn't seem to end. No, the lesson is that you are not what you do. When you get cut off from your work, from the things that you believe make you meaningful, it is tragic and traumatic. This has been a hard lesson for most of us to learn – we are not what we do with our time. You are not your work or even your hobbies. These activities are a part of your life but not all of you. The other powerful lesson is that we must find meaning. We must find things, activities, experiences that speak to us, even if they are quite small – like baking bread, reading, doing puzzles with loved ones. A small life is still a life. Meaningfulness without work is possible. You are enough. And consumerism and capitalism is not everything. It's not even that important, we can get by with less and the government can in fact attempt to take care of us. There is money out there and sometimes the government can part with it. So these lessons: you are enough and your are not your work. These lessons must be held onto because right now capitalism and society wants its stuff back. It wants you to forget those lessons and return to consuming. We are told now, you don't need to quarantine for 10 days because the workforce needs you. Rosie the Riveter needs you. My answer to that and Jesus' answer to that is no. No they don't. Jesus needs you to appreciate yourself to love yourself and your life. Not to consume and participate in the ever expanding capital around us. Capitalism will demand all of you. And yet Christ demand more of you.

For you are baptized into Christ. It is not that you do anything your baptism. This is the great gift of Reformed Theology. That before we were even born God chose us and loves us. Christ is doing something amazing with our bodies in baptism. Christ is transforming them for shalom. For community and connection. For love and peace and hope. For the utilization of the body in praise not in degradation. What Paul envisions here is the restoration of what was lost through Cain and Abel. When Cain and Abel fight and destroy the bonds of siblings, bring murder into the human story, our lives become solidly connected to death and heartache. And yet, God seeks restoration. Cain is not punished for killing Abel by the same means that he is called to be punished. Because Cain kills, God does not

kill in response. Cain is given grace to live. Through Cain, his children establish culture – different occupations, skills and talents for the building of community. The same holds true when we think of the Tower of Babel. When we work together nothing is impossible and this God sees. Yet, we are scattered because we used our good for prideful and selfish gains. When God looks at the body, God looks at the whole not just its parts and wants all the parts to fit together in unity and wholeness. Shalom is the restoration of the good. The restoration of the body of people back to who God has called them to be, in peace and harmony.

In the Methodist Church there is a Sunday dedicated to Disability Awareness. It is a day when the readings and focus is on disability and awareness of the church's response. It is a beautiful reflection of the Kingdom of God, which is about inclusion and love. As a society we have begun to move away from the language of handicap, from the language of otherness that says those who live lives different than what we call "normal" are not as good or as welcome. It brings up the idea of whether in our disability there is something beautiful and powerful that can be used for God's kingdom. This is the ultimate paradox that Paul talks about in that in our weakness there is strength. And as well, if we see ourselves through the lens of individuality we actually find a lot of inability and weakness. For the hands cannot do what the feet do, the eyes and ears have different functions. This does not make one part greater than the other, rather it brings the parts into closer relationship with one another. A sense of dependability emerges. So as Paul says, "If the foot would say because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body" And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body." We are one in body. And just because one part of our body has a different function than another does not make one part lesser or greater than another. This holds true even if our bodies fail us in some way or are classified as "dis-abled." For in our disability we often find a greater ability. For instance, some who are blind have better hearing due to greater need and the body's compensation for the loss of sight. Sometimes if one part of our body is in pain, another part takes over. These bodies that we have, though

they decay, and slow down, and causes us heartache – are beautiful and precious. And important in all their parts for the kingdom of God.

And what if God meets us in our parts, in these bodies in our abilities and disabilities. Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche communities – places throughout the world where people who are considered able bodied live with those who have developmental disabilities, tells the story of a resident in one of their communities. “The woman Angela, who was deaf, began to tell us about a dream she’d had. In that dream she had met with Jesus in heaven. She and Jesus talked for some time, and she said she had never experienced such peace and joy. “Jesus was everything I had hoped he would be, she said. And his signing was amazing!” His signing was amazing. Not that he had miraculously cured her from her deafness in her dream. But that Jesus met her where she was. He offered her comfort and love where she was. Her disability was no obstacle for Jesus. So Jesus meets us where we are. In our bodies, arthritic, swollen, over-weight, pained and gives us what we actually need which is love and presence.

This is what we as the church are called to do. Meet each other where we are. Paul is also saying here that Jesus calls us to a different way. We are not called to honor and glorify power and accomplishment in society. But to recognize the weak and vulnerable and discover the strength in community. The Greco-Roman world much like our world today, was obsessed with power and status. They didn’t have instagram followers but they knew the power of the Senate, of knowing people with money, of utilizing connections to advance. The wealthy were seen as more holy. More honorable, closer to God, simply because they were wealthy. And Paul looks at this and says no. Power and status are not the end. Power, wealth, honor do not make anyone closer to God. They are not the goal of Christian life. Community and support and love, are the goals of Christian life. We become closer to God by drawing closer to one another.

This church, in its building, holds the prestige of what was downtown Kankakee. It is a symbol and reflection of a time of prosperity and growth. A time that is not anymore. For the community

around us is struggling, is suffering, the ravages of economic disparity, environmental abuse, and racial divide. As I look around this church, I recognize in you all the pain of growth and loss. There are people missing from our midst. People who should be here and are not. There are pains in places that are known and unknown between you all. And yet, the pain in this church does not define you or the church that you embody. I saw a shirt recently that said on the front, "I don't go to church." And on the back it said, "I am the church." You are the church for the world to see. The world may not walk through these doors in downtown Kankakee. But the world walks through your lives and so it gets to know you and Christ through you.

Hospitality is essential to the community of God. You all have this hospitality. You know how to be invitational, how to be caring. I hear you seeking connection. I hear you seeking the truth and the true church. That true church is found within you and around you. The pandemic has tested the limits of most of us in how we see ourselves and our world. We may be tempted to avoid pain and sorrow to not address the suffering of ourselves and our neighbors but this is not the way to go. The more that we lean into pain, the more we know it and can address it. God calls us to address pain. To look deeply at ourselves and look for ways to create shalom. Ways to stop being quiet so violent to ourselves. Ways to step into the unknown because we know that the unknown is known to God. Pain is not weakness. Pain is not good or bad in and of itself. Pain is a sign of something going on. Something to be addressed and looked at. If pain, is vulnerability, then it is a vulnerability that opens us up to community and fullness of life.

So how do we make community? We make community by recognizing that we belong to one another. No person is an island, which may be easier for us to understand now during this pandemic. Being alone, being cut off from community is not good. God made Adam and Eve for a reason, that they would have one another. They clung to one another after being expelled from the garden of Eden and started a new life together. So it is that we work together for new life. It is also why mental illness

and addiction are so difficult to overcome. Addictions force us into ourselves and out of community. This is true in alcoholism, substance abuse, or shopping addiction, gambling addiction, food addiction, relationship addiction- they all manifest the same. The individual seeking to get needs met in unhealthy ways. But community belongs to God. Community says that struggle is real and that we share in the struggle with our brothers and sisters. When we offer mutual support to one another we recognize that the different parts of ourselves, of our communities, have worth and value for the entire functioning of the body. The gift of the Holy Spirit is that diversity is not a problem to be avoided, solved or managed but in fact a gift of grace through the work of the Holy Spirit. By supporting one another, by seeking community around us we begin to building the beloved community, the beloved body of Christ. We are in fact all unionized members of the body of Christ. We are united under the common banner of baptism, by which we enter into family relationship with one another, harmony in all its parts.

The life of the spirit of connection is the life and work of Christ. Our diversity is a gift because it lifts up all the capabilities of the body. So it is not that we look at ourselves and say that we are past our prime or that we have nothing to offer this community in these walls or outside. No, it is to look deeply at ourselves and determine what gifts we have and how we can uplift each other so that we can serve the community. In business, the anticipation of needs is considered of the highest values. If you can anticipate the needs of your customers, you can offer quality care and service. So we anticipate our own needs by knowing that in Christ we will have wholeness, but maybe not perfection. We don't have to be everything to everyone, as Paul struggles with elsewhere in his letters. We are called to be who we are. And to love who we are, because we are made that way and unified in the spirit through our baptism to be the body of Christ. For this reason as well, we can look at our community, when they are struggling and say, "It is good that you are here. It is good that you are alive." Because each and everyone of us has a part to play in the body of Christ.

It is risky and scary to be a part of this body because it does in fact come with responsibilities. Responsibilities for ourselves and for our neighbors. But that's where the grace comes in. From God we know that when part of us falls, another part can pick us back up. So if you can't do something, praise the Lord, there is another who can. And yet, we are not called to be those other parts of the body but to recognize and honor them for their part in the kingdom of God. We are called to be who we are in our abilities and dis-abilities and to give God the glory for uniting us in the body of Christ. So the activity that I do with my residents is I have them draw their hand, like a Thanksgiving turkey, and write everything that they do with their hands, the physical and metaphysical. Then we discuss it. Then they draw their eyes and write what they have seen with their eyes. And while we tend to recognize the negative in what we have seen in our lives, we can see the beauty in our hands, the caring and loving we have done. These parts of our bodies are connected and meaningful. Give yourself grace to recognize that the hands that help are the same body as the eyes that see pain. There is unity in our bodies and the body of Christ. For we are one, united in love, praising God for our salvation and the grace and mercy that passes all understanding. Be gracious to your body, for your body, the body of this church, belongs to God. Amen.