



WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

“Embracing the Our Body Image”

Sermon preached by Anne Ledbetter

Sunday, August 30, 2009

Scripture – I Corinthians 12:12-27 (*The Message* version)

Howard occasionally sang as a soloist at his church, but he did not sing in the choir. The pastor asked the choir director about this, and she shrugged saying, “He simply cannot sing in a group and blend his voice with others; he overpowers everyone else and throws some people off.”

A month later Howard’s wife went to see their pastor, and confided that she was considering a divorce. “I don’t know what to do! I love him, but we don’t have a partnership. Howard will not make decisions with me about anything: the children, the house, vacations, investments. He either has to be in charge or he won’t participate.”

Just a few weeks later Howard was diagnosed with cancer. Suddenly, he could not “go it alone.” He needed to trust his medical team to help him weigh treatment options; he needed to depend on family and home health aides to provide the most intimate care; he needed to delegate decisions at his workplace. For the first time in his adult life, Howard knew himself as part of a broader community, a community that was working together to help him return to full health.

Howard could no longer say to others, “I have no need of you.” As his body recovered, his heart and soul also healed from a deep alienation; and he awoke to the profound realization that human beings need each other.¹

This is the essence of Paul’s message to the church in Corinth read this morning. Dissension rumbled and competition had erupted in that early congregation – problems that arise in any group of two or more people. The apostle employed this image of the body, as a powerful metaphor for the Church. Just as all the members of a body are different yet essential, so it is with the members of the church. Indeed, we need each other in order to be a fully functioning body. How could the eye say to the foot, “get lost!” Even the parts that we do not see or notice because they are either clothed or internal are important, indeed vital. What would we do without a stomach? How could one survive without a liver or kidney? Strangely enough the obscured parts are often the most important. We can live without an eye, but not without a heart.

Recently our church staff had our annual retreat to consider our particular roles and shared work. Our retreat leader asked us to complete in advance two assessments – one being the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Our “test results” essentially indicated how we engage with the world and others. As I recall, none of us had the same 4 letter Myers-Briggs profile as in INTJ, or ESFP, because, of course, each of us **is** a *most unique* individual. Our facilitator had us stand on opposite sides of the room for each letter – did our profile indicate that we were E-extroverts or I-introverts, were we N-intuitives or S-sensors, ... you get the idea. Our most

lopsided moment in this exercise occurred when only three people stood on the T-Thinking side, and the rest of us flocked to the F-Feeling side. Our thinkers – those logical, reasoning, precise types – turned out to be our newest staff members; and we realized what a vital role they play, offsetting a heavily emotional, empathic, accommodating staff. In other words, we would be in trouble without these Thinking types! Reviewing our own personality profile, and then seeing how we fit collectively as a whole, helped us discern the gifts each person possesses, and how these gifts can balance and blend together so that we can work productively as a staff.

The apostle Paul would point out that we are different parts of the same body. That is, we have different skills and interests, but we are connected, for better or worse, and it may feel like both some days!

But note that Paul says we are not just members of *a* body, but *Christ's* body. We are not simply connected because we are all human, but because we have been baptized. Our primary identity springs from our baptism wherein we were marked as followers of Christ. Paul tells the Corinthians, “you can't use old ways of identifying yourselves – as Jews or Gentiles, as men or women, as slaves or free. Your name is now simply **Christian** – baptized in water, marked in Christ.” Likewise, we are not black and white and brown. We are not gay, straight, bi-sexual, or transgendered. We are not liberals, conservatives, progressives, fundamentalists, or traditionalist. We are simply people of the font, children of God. We are all sheep trying to follow the Good Shepherd. We are pilgrims thirsting for the same living water. We are members of the one body.

And here is the clincher: since this body to which we belong is *Christ's* body, *Christ* is in charge, not us. Christ is the head of the body, which means Christ has authority over it. We forget this key truth repeatedly. We act like this table is our table, but it is not. It is Christ's, [and it is He who invites and feeds.] Moreover, we tend to practice our own private acts of excommunication, saying to a particular person or group, “I have no need of you.” Think about it: who is it that you dismiss? Who are the ones you mentally disqualify from the body? Is it the gossipers – who can't keep a lock on their lips? Is it those who want to discuss everything ad nauseum before taking a vote at a meeting? Is it the ones who say they'll do something and then do not? Or is it people you instinctively fear? The homeless person? The one with mental illness? The child abuser? The drug addict turned thief? Jesus sought out those who were hated and feared, those pushed to the periphery of society. The apostle reminds us that there can be no “dissing” in the body of Christ - no disregarding one another. Everyone matters. Everyone.

Through the ages the Church, Christ's body, has divided itself into different bodies of believers – from Roman Catholics to Reformed, from Episcopalians to Presbyterians, Baptists and Lutherans, Methodists, Mennonites. We even subdivide into Free Will Baptists, Southern Baptists, and American Baptists; or Orthodox, Evangelical, or Cumberland Presbyterians! And yet, no matter how we delineate or describe ourselves, we cannot change the fact that we are all baptized in the One Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Another JC, John Calvin, our forebear in the faith, offered these profound and prophetic words: ***The Body of Christ cannot be divided.*** That's right, the body of Christ cannot be divided, no matter what we might think. Why? Because Christ is the head of the body, and Christ can find a way to use every one of us as part of his resurrected body in the world – proclaiming love, working for justice, showing compassion, pursuing peace.

God has so arranged the different parts of the body that we are dependent on one another – we need each other. We are inextricably interrelated.

When one member suffers, it affects us all.

When one member rejoices, we too share in the exultation.

I would add that when one member dies, the body is changed. When another is born or baptized into the church, the body is repeatedly transformed. Former member Jane Kline has been on my mind lately, perhaps since she died a year ago this week. I have thought of Jane frequently in the last year, missing her and the role she played in our Westminster body of believers. During the years I knew Jane, she did not serve on session, she was not Moderator of Women of Westminster nor did she head up the deacons. Jane's place in our church body was inconspicuous, not readily seen, but powerfully felt. Jane's special calling and gift was writing notes to people – people struggling with a health problem, someone searching for a job, a youth who made Eagle Scout, an adult whose father had died, a child who played an instrument in worship, and on occasion a pastor who looked a little tired. Jane herself had suffered significant loss in her life. What could have made her bitter, only made Jane more sensitive to the lives of those around her – as she routinely reached out with pen and notepaper, sending her love and prayers through the US mail.

Jane perceived her place in Christ's body and played her role with grace and humility. But what about the rest of us? In the last verse of our passage, I can almost picture (the apostle) Paul shaking his finger at us, "You are Christ's body – that's who you are! You must never forget this!" How will you "remember" that you are inextricably part of the body of Christ?

- By writing a note to our homebound members each week, or visiting someone in the hospital?
- By calling someone you haven't seen at church in a blue moon, and asking them to sit with you next Sunday?
- By praying for those who are grieving or facing surgery?
- By traveling to New Orleans this November to help rebuild houses?
- By becoming a Covenant Partner to a confirmation youth, or a Parish Partner to a new member?
- By becoming a Caring Friend to a homebound person, or delivering flowers on Sunday after church?
- By volunteering as a computer mentor to a resident in Burton House?
- By undergoing training for prison ministry, and visiting an inmate?

As we notice those who have been cut off from the body – by illness or disability, by social stigma, loneliness or grief, we have the opportunity, indeed the *responsibility*, to re-member them into the body by reaching out with the love and hospitality of Christ.

How will each of us embrace our body image as a church, as the people of God? Christ, our head, sends us out to be his hands and feet in the world, embodying his love and compassion and justice.

During WWII, many European churches were victims of the bombing, and a church in Strasbourg was destroyed. Nothing remained except a heap of rubble and broken glass, or so the people thought till they began clearing away the masonry. Then they found a statue of Christ still standing erect. In spite of all the bombing it was unharmed except that both hands were missing. Eventually rebuilding of the church began. One day a sculptor saw the statue of Christ, and offered to carve new hands. The church officials met to consider the sculptor's kind offer—and eventually decided not to accept. Why? Because the members of that church said: "Our broken statue touches our spirits reminding us that Christ has no hands to minister to the needy or feed

the hungry or enrich the poor—except our hands.”ⁱⁱ These Christians of Strasburg had perceived their role, their calling as members of Christ’s body. Have we?

In the 16th century, a Carmelite nun in Spain, Teresa of Avila, proclaimed in her writings this mysterious nature of the Church:

**Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours.ⁱⁱⁱ**

ⁱ Andrea La Sonde Anastos, “The Grace of the Law” *Disciplines* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2004) p. 37.

ⁱⁱ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations : A Treasury of Illustrations, Anecdotes, Facts and Quotations for Pastors, Teachers and Christian Workers* (Garland TX: Bible Communications, 1996, c1979).

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted by Daniel B. Clendenin, PhD www.journeywithjesus.net