

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Sermon Title: *The Beautiful and Chaotic Body of Christ*

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

LEADER: ¹² 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. ¹³ 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.

All: ¹⁴ *Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.*

LEADER: ¹⁵ If the foot were to say,

Left: 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body',

LEADER: that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear were to say,

Right: 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body',

LEADER: that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ 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?

All: ¹⁸ *But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as God chose.*

LEADER: ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand,

Left: 'I have no need of you',

LEADER: nor again the head to the feet,

Right: 'I have no need of you.'

LEADER: ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ 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; ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.

All: ²⁶ *If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.*

LEADER: ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

“You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

Some years back there was a slogan from Mennonite Central Committee that some of you will remember, it was on a small poster that some put on the office doors, it was called, “A Modest Proposal for Peace” and it went like this: “A Modest Proposal for Peace: Let the Christians of the world agree that they will not kill each other.” Of course, we would argue that Christians should not kill anyone, but, I guess that is why it was called a modest proposal, perhaps we could just get Christians to stop killing other Christians in the name of Christ – this might lead to peace. That idea works from taking seriously this image laid out by Paul, that we are members of the body of Christ, that one Christian killing another Christian is like the body having an autoimmune disease, turning on itself – attacking itself until the body is crippled or has ceased living.

“You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

Paul knew he could get people’s attention with this image of the body – it was a familiar metaphor, not only for us but for first century Christians as well – other writers in the Greek and Roman world (especially politicians and philosophers) had often used this same image. Most often, it was used to support the existing social hierarchy (whether in the family, or the city, or the empire as a whole). The point of the Greek and Roman writers was that every body needs a head, and in the Greco-Roman world that was provided by the wealthy, by political rulers and the elite. And every body needs hands and feet to do the hard and dirty work, and that was provided in the Greco-Roman world by just about everyone else: slaves, peasant farmers, laborers,

occupied subjects – these existed to serve the head, the wealthy and the politicians. Paul then, while drawing on this familiar image, flips the understanding – he changes the understanding of the metaphor. It is not the elite and wealthy who are the head, but it is Jesus Christ. The unity of the body, says Paul, does not, in fact, mean that the less honored members get abused and treated roughly for the benefit of others, rather that all the parts belong to one another; that all parts must be cared for and some parts of the body are more vulnerable than other parts – some parts need to be cared for and protected. If one suffers, says Paul, the whole body suffers.

A few years ago Goshen College, one of the Mennonite colleges, had a campaign which they entitled, “What are you making peace with?” It was their advertising campaign for a couple of years – they had local commercials with students talking about how they were planning to use what they were learning at school to be an agent of peacemaking. This did not just mean highlighting the Peace, Justice, and Conflict Studies majors at the school, rather it focused on all other majors – of those pursuing their Masters of Business Administration and how they would be using that to make peace; for those involved in music and theater and how they would use that to make peace; for those majoring in education and how they would use that to make peace. You get the picture, I think. They had t-shirts that they gave to perspective students, that peace written in big letters on the front, and when you got closer you saw that each letter was made up of others words, representing how people were making peace: education, medicine, Spanish, etc.

It was a brilliant campaign that took this concept of the Body of Christ seriously, the idea as we tried to illustrate during Intergenerational time that we all have a part to play in being the

body of Christ – an equally important part to play in being agents of healing and hope to the world, or as Goshen College put it, in making peace in the world. This campaign also tried to help all students to consider, how would they take what they were learning and doing in college and use that to bless the world? How were these young people going to take seriously the concept that their education was not just for their own benefit, but for the benefit of others as well – to be blessing to the world.

What this campaign also did, was that it boiled the whole of the gospel down to one thing, making peace. The campaign was not, “what are you making good news with?” ,or “How are you showing the love of God to the world?”, nor was it, “What are you bringing healing and hope with?” But quite specifically, what are you making peace with? And, as much as I hope to be one who proclaims with my mouth and my life, that the gospel is a gospel of peace, I would also not say that the whole of Jesus’ message comes down to only making peace. Maybe I shouldn’t say this too loudly, but Jesus’ message was not only about peace and justice – that is one element of the good news that Jesus was proclaiming, but it not the entire message.

For people living under military occupation, the message of peace was a strong and vital part of the gospel; for a people who were largely poor, work all day to literally feed your family type of poor, the message of justice and care for the poor was a strong and vital part of the gospel. And yet, it still does not encapsulate the entirety of Jesus’ life and teachings: there is honesty, “let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no’.” There is holiness, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill.” There is prayer, “Your Heavenly Parent knows what you need before you ask...Pray then in this way: Our

Mother & Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...” There is simplicity, “do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy.” There is releasing our anxiety, “do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.” There is seeking God, “ask and it will be given you; search and you will find.”

The gospel is more than peace; Jesus’ life and teachings are about justice and peace, and they are also about more. So, if this campaign was trying to say that *all* of the gospel is peace, then they were not telling the whole story.

But, if this campaign was trying to instead say, the gospel is huge and vast – there are many ways to bring the good news to the world, there are many ways to bring healing and hope to the world – we cannot teach you all of them, we cannot cover each area of the gospel, for the needs of the world are as vast and diverse as the 8 billion people who live in it. But what we can do is to teach you about peace – we can help you consider how you will take your gifts and talents and use them to be instruments of justice and peace in this world; we can help you take whatever is you are learning here and lay a lens of peace over the top of that. We are not good at everything, but we are good at helping formulate an understanding of working for peace and reconciliation in the world – we are good helping people be peacemakers.

If this is what their campaign was about, then I think they were pretty spot on – recognizing that they are not suppose to be the whole body, but simply one part of the body of Christ in a vast and diverse world.

God has many faces, many attributes. No group of people is able to lift-up all faces of God. God is more vast and mysterious than even the 8 billion people on the planet. Our role, as

a community of faith, is to lift up the face of God we understand to the world. As a community formed through the theology of peace and the work of justice, we must continue to lift-up this face of God to the world; we must continue to remind others in the Christian body that while the gospel is not peace, it is also incomplete without peace; while the gospel is not only about justice, it can never be complete without justice. As Christians who come from a Mennonite perspective, this is one of our functions within the worldwide body of Christ – to keep sending that message throughout the body, that God’s work is about a just peace, to keep pulsating that message throughout the central nervous system.

Our sisters and brothers who are Pentecostal, they lift-up to us the face of God that is the Holy Spirit still on the move; our Catholic friends, they lift-up to God the mystery of God and the ancientness of God; our Mormon neighbors, they remind us of the importance of families in faith formation; our Evangelical sisters and brothers, they lift-up the face of God that is holiness and moral living. All of us understand elements of who God is and how God loves, and all of us miss elements of who God is and how God loves.

Our job is not to become like the other parts of the body. Our job is to be uniquely who we are, to be peculiarly who we are – knowing that we are incomplete – knowing that we cannot do it all and we should not try to do it all. For, as Paul tells us, the liver must be the liver or the body will perish – if the liver tries to be the lungs, then our body is in trouble. If Mennonites try to be Baptists or Catholics or Pentecostals – then the body is in trouble; then the world is in trouble.

Diversity, says Herbert McCabe, is something necessary and healthy in the Church... There are, and there have to be, many different ways of expressing the gospel, the good news that transcends any possible account of it. There are, and there have to be, different theologies. Within the Bible itself we have different theologies, different views being lifted-up: we have a gospel of *Luke* which emphasizes Jesus' ministry to the marginalized, to the poor, to the outsider. We have the gospel of *Matthew* which seeks to tell the story of Jesus from a uniquely Jewish perspective. We have the gospel of *John* which seeks to connect Jesus to the beginning of creation, to the beginning of time. However the Bible came to be, we must appreciate that those who put it together did not say, "only *Luke* is the true picture of Jesus" or "only *John* is the true picture of Jesus." But all together, they emphasize pieces of Jesus' life and teachings that are true, that we need, that the world needs.

Of course, this is easy to do and to believe when the differences seem small. It is easy to say, "we are all one body" when the differences seem slight between Methodists and Mennonites, or between Lutherans and Catholics. It is much harder as our differences grow, when we wonder whether we truly are part of the same body. Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of being at a march for peace on Martin Luther King, Jr. day where she lives in Georgia. She describes the scene of clergy being out front leading the march full of young people, Americorp volunteers and other city leaders and citizens. As they were marching they sang together, "He's got the whole world in His hands." Marching and singing. And as they turned the corner singing, they saw a group of counter-protesters from the Ku Klux Klan. These KKK

members held signs, one with a picture of Dr. King whose face was covered with a rifle viewfinder. Another sign says, "James Early Ray made our *dream* come true." And a third sign read, "Christ is our King!"

The question is of course, are part of the same body as these KKK members, are we part of the same body of Christ as them? Or are we part of separate bodies? I have struggled with this question this week and I am not sure how to answer that. It is a question we have to wrestle with, I guess. I think though, whatever our answer, our calling is the same, to continue to be a people who keep sending the message of justice and peace throughout the body, to keep pulsating that message throughout the central nervous system.

"You are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

The greatest gift you can give to the church and to the world is to be yourself. The world needs us to be the best and most beautiful Hyde Park Mennonite Fellowship we can be, in all our oddities and in all our beauty. No one else can be you, and no one else can be us. Not that we are perfect, no body is. We are simply trying to be fully who God has created us to be. May we be the beautiful Hyde Park Mennonite Fellowship we can be. Amen.

Sending Blessing

Now as you go from this place, may the Spirit of God go with you, empowering you to be fully who God has created you to be:

*You, who are our heart, keep our blood pumping,
You, who are our lungs, keep us breathing,
You, who are our conscience, keep convicting us,
You, who are our hands and arms, keep holding us,
You, who are our feet, keep us moving,
You, who are our empathy, keep us feeling,
You, who are our rational brain, keep us thinking,
You, who are our imagination, keep us dreaming,
That healing and hope might flow through us and into the world.
Go in peace.
Amen.*