

Sunday, January 24, 2016
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Body Parts

A couple of summers ago I was in the checkout line at the grocery store, and I was putting an item from my grocery cart onto the conveyor belt, and I dropped said item on my foot. Tears sprang immediately, reflexively, to my eyes, and I gasped, sharply, in pain. If I had had the breath, a not-so-holy word might have come out of my mouth. The item that I dropped on my foot was a can of beans, and I was wearing flip flops. After a second the stars in front of my eyes disappeared and I could see again, and I paid and hobbled out. Nothing was broken, but for a surprisingly good number of days the pain slowed me down in any number of ways.

When my cousin was in college he spent summers working construction. One day, as his hand was guiding a board towards a bandsaw, he got a little too close to the rapidly rotating blade. What happened next was not as bad as you might be imagining, thankfully, but he did nick off the very tip of his left thumb. My cousin said that the pain of that injury was shocking—think of all those nerve endings we have in our hands—and shockingly long-lasting. They put him on heavy duty pain meds and he spent the rest of the summer working in a highway tollbooth collecting fares.

Now, I don't mean to be replacing today's sermon with descriptions of bodily calamity—there are websites you can look to for that, though I suggest you don't. You probably don't need to, to get the point. You have probably had some experience of the way pain to one part, maybe just a small part of the body, can interrupt and overtake a person: you poke yourself in the eye, or you have a sore tooth, a sprained wrist, a pain in your back—they can all set you back. The body part in question might be pretty small, but what is affected is not small at all. What is affected is the whole body. Suffering in one part of the body affects the whole, the whole of the body, the whole of your life.

Then there are those body parts that pain us in other ways. There's something about our body that we don't like. Perhaps we feel that a particular body part is too narrow, too pointy. Or perhaps there are parts that we think it are too broad, too full. When I was a teenager, like many adolescents, I spent way too much time obsessing over one of my physical features. I say one, but the specific feature I found wanting was subject to change. I'm happy to announce that I never obsess about part of my body anymore. Ha. I try not to, but still do. The truth is, even as we age, sometimes especially as we age, many of us have a problem with one or more of our body parts. In doing so, it can be as if we are saying to that body part, "I don't like you. I wish I didn't have you."

How is it we say that, about our bodies? How can we say that about, our ears? Our ears may be set on our heads at different angles, may be in different sizes, but in giving us ears, God has so arranged it that we may we hear, that we may hear things like music, and laughter, and the words "I love you." Or our eyes—our eyes may be shaped many different ways, they come in various colors, but they have been so arranged that we may see, that we may be able to see a world of great and varied beauty. How powerful and precious our bodies are, these amazing amalgamations of cells and sensors, these wonders of both art and science, the human body, which, as the psalmist says, is fearfully and wondrously made. How is it that we can not care for it?

How is it, that we would ever say to a body part, “I wish I didn’t have you. I have no need of you.” It is ridiculous. The apostle Paul notes this, in today’s reading from Corinthians. Paul writes how ridiculous it would be if one part of the body would say that it had no need of another: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you,’” says the apostle Paul. That would be ridiculous, but we do it. We do this in any number of ways, with any number of body parts, even though we know how important they are. We know it, especially, when one of our parts is hurting.

What’s even worse, though, is that we do this, we say this, not just to our own bodies, but to other bodies, to other people. We say to them, “I don’t like you. I have no need of you.” What Paul writes is not about body parts, or not *just* about body parts, Paul is writing about the body of Christ, people in faith communities, congregations, the body of Christ—that’s the phrase that Christians use when we talk about the church. We get this from Paul. Paul uses this metaphor to illustrate that just as a human body has many different parts, so a church has many different parts, is composed of many different kinds of people. (How good it was to have many different readers for this reading from Corinthians.) Paul uses the metaphor of a body to illustrate, and develop, what he talked about in the section just prior to this passage, the reading that we heard last week from Corinthians. In that passage, which is the lead up to this week’s passage, Paul writes about the different gifts that the Spirit gives to different members of faith communities. Paul writes, “to one is given the gift of, and to another the gift of…” We heard that just last week, just as we hear it every time we install Church Council leaders here. We hear that, and we are reminded that there are a variety of gifts. We all have different talents, different functions. And, as Paul continues in the reading today, we all need each other. We need these different parts, these different functions, for a church is like a body.

It makes so much sense, it’s so easy to understand, when you think of the human body—but when you extend the metaphor to the church, the body of Christ, it gets so much harder. Just as hard—maybe even harder—than accepting your own body, is accepting someone else’s. We all have ears, but we hear things differently. We all have eyes, but we see things in different ways. But if we are to be the body of Christ, Paul says, we pay attention to these differences. In fact, Paul says, we go even farther, we give special honor to those parts that seem smaller, weaker, inferior. We give them special care; we treat them as indispensable; we protect them; we try to prevent them from injury. And then if—when—other members are injured, when they are in pain, we care for them. Because when one member hurts, the whole body suffers.

That’s how it works in the body, that’s how it works in the body of Christ. We get this from Paul, who got it from Christ. At the center of Christian faith is a body: Jesus’ body. In Jesus, God knows what it is like to have eyes and ears. In Jesus God knows what it is to have hands and feet—hands and feet that would be stretched out wide and nailed to a tree. In Jesus, God knows what it is like to feel pain, to suffer, to die. At the center of Christian faith is a body, a wounded body, a crucified body, a resurrected body.

We are that body. We are hands, feet, eyes, ears—we are members of one body, Christ’s body. Each one of us, with our different gifts, our different functions, when we come together here, at the communion table, we hear Christ’s command: “Take and eat, this is my body. Do this and remember me.” Do this, and re-member me.” Many members, we become one body, Christ’s body.