

“Looking Into the Mirror”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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1 Corinthians 12: 12-31

Last week, we talked about the importance of all spiritual gifts within the community of faith, and how we need to work at specific ways to discern those gifts for the best use to build up the church. Today, we are met with an analogy by Paul which reinforces why those gifts are so important, and how they are interdependent on one another.

Raewynne Whiteley writes: *The human body has 206 bones, 639 muscles, and about 6 pounds of skin, along with ligaments, cartilage, veins, arteries, blood, fat and more. Every time we hear a sound; every time we take a step; every time we take a breath, hundreds of different parts work together so that what we experience is a single movement, our minds and bodies working as one unit. Even the greatest engineers struggle to achieve anything like it in mechanical form. The human body represents one of the most complex systems in existence.*

That is why the body is one of the most powerful images for the church offered in Scripture. The metaphor conveys both complexity and organic unity. Often people find it difficult to name their place in the church, but asked to envision themselves as a part of the body, children and adults of all ages have little difficulty identifying themselves as hands, feet, brains, and funny bones! (Raewynne J. Whiteley, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 279-281)

Paul uses an analogy here which is easily accessible to his audience, and allows us to think quickly about where our place is in the “body of Christ.” And yet, as we talked about last week, we still have a tendency in the church to think that some spiritual gifts are more important than others. We tend to believe that either we are inferior to another member of the body, or we judge that another could not possibly be as important as we are. We feel we know what is best for the whole body, and we really aren’t interested in hearing the opinions of the “brains” or “hearts” or “eyes” or “ears.”

Parents can identify with how this feels as they raise their children from infants to teenagers and beyond. Many times, a child wishes to do something for him or herself, without any help from others. And so, as the parent, you watch your child attempt to do whatever it may be independently. Your reaction might be bemusement, frustration, or some other sentiment. But ultimately, you realize that until your child asks for your help, you must let him or her struggle on their own. They have to get to a point where they don’t see assistance as a burden or weakness, but an opportunity to learn and grow.

I’ve always found it interesting that as humans, we view accepting help or assistance as a weakness. We believe that being independent, not needing another’s assistance, is what makes one strong. Yet in the larger scheme of things, when we become so fiercely independent that we reject others’ attempts at

assistance, that is the very definition of weakness, not strength. For when we lose perspective on how we are interconnected with one another, then we have forgotten the gifts God has given to others in the body, and how those gifts may enhance our quality of life.

Some have asked me why I feel I need a sabbatical, a time away for renewal and rest. How did I know it was necessary – for me and for the church – to take such an intentional time? I can tell you that for me, a clear sign that I needed this upcoming time of renewal was the fact that I had lost perspective on how we are interconnected to one another. And one example of that came in a clear way: Christmas Eve.

For years, I felt as if the worship service on Christmas Eve was “my baby.” I treasured that service, for it had always had special significance in my faith growing up, and I wanted to make it “perfect” for everyone who came. So, in my attempts to do the best I could, I over-functioned and did not invite as many people into the planning process as I normally would. It’s a stressful time for many people, so I didn’t want to add more to others’ plates. I thought I was being helpful.

In fact, this led to the opposite being the case. The service fell flat and disjointed because I didn’t trust other parts of the body to do their natural part. I just did what we had always done, but couldn’t see and hear how it was no longer meaningful to others. In fact, I hadn’t spent the time to listen to my own heart and ask whether it was meaningful to me. I hadn’t looked into the mirror to see what was truly there.

That mirror came in the form of two members of the church taking a risk and sharing their thoughts and feelings in an honest, personal way. They didn’t hide behind phrases like, “I hear others saying” or “there’s talk about this.” They were people I respect and care about deeply. And while at first it was not easy to hear, I have come to appreciate deeply the reflection they offered for me to see what was happening, where I was, and how the entire body needed to be involved in such an important part of our life together.

As a result, we looked at and approached Christmas Eve in a different way this past year. The Worship Team of the Session talked at length about what our purpose was with this service, and how to best fulfill that purpose. All the different music ministries, its leaders, and other lay leaders were involved throughout the year for how to best contribute musically to the service. By the time December 24 rolled around, I had a much different feeling about this service. I realized by relying on others, by giving up some responsibility, and by trusting other members of the body, I was more relaxed and excited about what was going to happen. And I believe, judging from the response we have received, the overall experience for those who attended was more meaningful than ever before.

This experience is indicative of what I hope to reclaim and renew in my time of Sabbath. This will be a time for me to look into the mirror and truly see what is there: my passions, my shortcomings, my hopes, my life. Then, I will chart a course for what will strengthen my ministry and life in service alongside you in this place. Sometimes, to look deeply into the mirror, we have to actually stop and be still in front of it, and not just take a passing glance while we rush to the next thing.

As I said last week, though, this time is not just about me but also about you. This is a chance for you to stop and look into the mirror and truly see what is there: your passions, your shortcomings, your hopes, your life. Do you see your differences as weaknesses which are impediments, or as strengths which deepen your faith? Do you value all the gifts which are present in this body, or is greater value placed on certain gifts at the expense of others? How will this body use this renewal time to evaluate who it has been, is, and wishes to be in the image of God?

I think my experience with the Christmas Eve service is not unique to life in the church, when we take others for granted and perhaps forget how important it is to equally share in building up the Body of Christ. For example, one of the most crucial ministries of our church is how we extend hospitality to our guests and attendees at worship on Sunday mornings. But recently, I've noticed it's a lot of the same people serving as ushers and greeters at each service, even though there are many, many others who have been trained and said they are willing to serve in this way. How might we share more equally in ministries such as ushering and greeting, so that a few members of the body don't become over-burdened, and the spirit of welcome and hospitality spreads more broadly throughout our congregation?

And yet, if there is one thing which we take from this lesson today more than anything else, it is that the body is will never reach its fullest potential unless all its members are fully utilizing their gifts. While we all wish to be a part of the body, we don't always comprehend what that truly requires of us as members of the body. Whiteley continues:

One of our human needs is the need to belong. We want to have a place in this earth. We want significance. Belonging is the gift of baptism, the gift of the Spirit.

And yet there is a tension here. Some people want to belong without belonging. They are the ones whose obituaries read, "Dorothy was a lifelong member of St. John's Church" - except that no one at St. John's can ever remember meeting her, although ninety-three-year-old Mrs. Smith thinks that maybe Dorothy was in a wedding she attended, and there is an entry for her in the baptism register, though nothing after that.

As far as 1 Corinthians is concerned, there is no such thing as belonging without participating. That (abolishes) the nature of the body. A body does not work when one part checks out for a few years; not only will its function be unfulfilled, but the rest of the body will be thrown out of balance. Belonging is not a one-sided affair. We are given the gift of belonging at baptism, but we are also signing up for the responsibility as part of the body of Christ (ibid).

The body is a complicated yet beautiful creation of God. It's no wonder Paul uses it as his analogy for the church. For even though there are many different members of the body, all are important for the body's overall functioning and health. So it is with the church. We are not weaker because of our differences; we are stronger as a result of them. As we approach a time to look into the mirror and see what lies inside each of us, may we joyfully seek to offer our gifts of service back to God for the strengthening and building up of the Body of Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.