

“The Body of Christ”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
January 27, 2019

1 Corinthians 12: 12-31

When you stop and think about it, these bodies of ours are pretty incredible. Most of us take it for granted – our health, our mobility, our bodies. That is until we experience an illness or an injury, and we then come to understand how much we rely on them functioning to their fullest capacity.

My mom is living through that right now. She fell and broke her wrist three days before Christmas, and had surgery January 15 to repair the break. When you’re right-handed, and your right hand is in a cast between your elbow and shoulder, you really become aware of how much you depend on your body being fully-functioning. But, as mom has discovered, you also learn to adapt and do things differently, in order to achieve what you need to do. And as time moves on, and she continues to heal and eventually be free of such restrictions, she will be able to be at full capacity once again. Anytime we experience an injury or an illness, we are reminded once again of what a remarkable creation our God has made in the form of the human body.

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 it got me thinking about our life at John Knox and how we are so inter-dependent on one another for our life in faith to thrive. For example, consider for a moment all that occurs for a service of worship to take place here.

The choir or praise band come together, along with the organist and director of music, and after having spent their time rehearsing prior to the service, they lead us in singing – individuals who come together to become one voice in song. The worship planning teams have worked on that particular service sometimes weeks in advance, and have chosen music, prayers, liturgy, and other materials for the congregation to experience. In order for us to have that information for worship, our secretary and volunteers spend time the week before compiling, editing, and printing both bulletins and power point presentations for Sunday. On Sunday, someone runs the power point slides, someone makes sure the sound is coming through, people greet us at the doors and distribute bulletins. We have people who are in the nursery every Sunday to care for our littlest ones, and we have people who teach our kids during children in worship. And probably the most important part of all – different people or teams each week bring in breakfast snacks and brew coffee for us to consumer either before or after worship. If we have communion, people prepare the bread and juice trays so we might celebrate the sacrament. We tend to average 100-120 people between our two services on a Sunday. And I would estimate that a third to a half that many each week are sharing their gifts to allow us to worship as the Body of Christ.

And yet, 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 as 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.

For example, let's go back to the example of worship on Sundays here at John Knox. Some of the times that I am most proud to be pastor of this congregation is when someone is unable to offer their gift for worship, and someone readily and joyfully steps in. There have been many times when illness or surprises, or yes, even memory lapses, cause us to not be able to sing or serve as liturgist or lead prayers or be an usher or greeter. And when I or others ask for help, I am humbled by how often people are readily willing to say, "Yes!" It's another example to me of what Paul is speaking about as the Body of Christ, and how we seek to live in community as disciples of God's Son.

What is your vision of the church? Does your answer reflect this passage from Corinthians? When I reflect on what is my vision of the church, I realize that this image of the body was in the background of my response. I envision the church as a healthy model to the world on how we are to live in community with one another. In other words, the way we treat one another within these walls becomes a model for those outside these walls as to how God wishes for us to be a community of faith.

What does that look like, you may ask? I see a community which does not return anger with anger, but defuses anger with compassion through listening and engaged conversation with all who are involved. I see a community which is slow to judge and understands the value of all the parts of the body. I see a community which understands when it needs the help of others, and is not afraid to ask and accept that assistance so that the common good might be achieved. I see a community which is not held hostage by its past, but looks forward with anticipation for how the Spirit will lead it toward the future. I see a community which knows that the only one who can "hold it all together" is not a brain or a heart or a pastor or an elder or a deacon; but is solely Jesus Christ our Lord.

William Loader writes: *Paul challenges us to see ourselves as the embodiment of Christ in the world, not primarily as individuals but as local communities, yet belonging also to a larger whole. Difference is acknowledged. People are not all the same. They do not all have the same abilities. The common life is nothing other than the life of Christ, the life of the Spirit. This remains the constant. In each situation the working out may vary, although not without the apostolic connection which keeps us connected to the whole in present time and in history. Thus, Paul deals with the common problems of divisiveness, especially of the kind generated by claims to the Spirit, by bringing people back to basics. Our sense of identity lies not in the role we play, nor the status, nor the reward our role brings, but in the sense of oneness with the life of Christ which is the life of God - and ultimately the life of all that is. We are not asked as individuals to be Christ or Christs, let alone saviours of the world, although many suffer from this misconception and the burn*

out it produces. We are asked to be members of a body, of Christ, and to play our part - not more, not less (<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/CEpEpiphany3.htm>).

Today we have the privilege, honor, and joy to ordain and install new leaders of our congregation to play their part in this body for the coming years. These women and men have been chosen by the Spirit through the voice of this congregation to be elders and deacons in the Presbyterian Church at this particular time for John Knox Presbyterian Church. After much prayer and consideration, they have affirmed this call by God to lead us in worship, education, mission, stewardship, and caring for one another. They have agreed to give their time, their ability, their minds, their attention, and their energy to you and to God for this particular purpose at this particular time.

But here's the thing. They are not called to serve in place of everyone else in the church. They are not called to be all the body parts so that you can take a breather for the next month or year. They are called by God to lead us for a set amount of time, but in doing so, we are all called to be the hands, feet, arms, legs, heart, mind, and soul of this body which God has instituted as the church. Indeed, later in this service, Pam Herman will ask you the following question: "Do we agree to pray for them, encourage them, to respect their decisions, and to follow as they guide us, serving Jesus Christ who alone is Head of the Church?" I would encourage you to take that question seriously, for in answering that question positively, we are saying we will not leave them on their own, but we will respect, encourage, and follow as they guide us, as we all serve the one who is head of the church - Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul writes, "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 . . . If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." I translate that as: we are all in this together. No matter how different our opinions, how long we have been a Christian, how young or old we are, how much we give, how different our backgrounds may be - no matter what may make us different, what makes us one is our baptism into the one Body of Christ. Paul says, "Strive for the greater gifts, and I will show you a still more excellent way." As we strive for the greater gifts, may we model to our world what it truly means to be that Body of Christ - in our words, our actions, and our love for one another.

Thanks be to God. Amen.