

Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 26-27, 2019

One Body

Just so you'll know, I *love* metaphors. I love stories and images and ideas that explain things in a new way so that I can begin to understand something difficult or puzzling to me. And I need metaphors to get by in this world, especially when they connect a brand new experience with an old one that is familiar and comfortable. And though I admit that I often struggle with Paul, the metaphor he offers in his first letter to the Corinthians we heard today is right up my alley. The Body of Christ as image for the whole church is almost too much to comprehend, but when Paul begins to talk about the human body and its parts, I am all attention. That is because the body is something I know something about.

As a doctor, I spent years learning about the body outside-in and inside-out. And then I spent many more years taking care of bodies of all kinds: all ages, shapes, sizes, colors, and in every possible state of health or disease. One of the most powerful and deeply spiritual experiences in my life was my early formal learning of human anatomy and physiology. If the natural world had not yet made a believer in God out of me, witnessing and learning the infinite complexities of the work of the human body did. The brilliance of the systems of tendons, muscles and joints giving us the flexibility of movement, and the precision and delicacy of the tissues that act like a pulley system in our eyes, allowing us to look from side to side, are just two of the miracles we carry around inside of us. The complexity of chemical transformations across membranes too thin to see--in our digestive tracts and in our arteries and veins--are mind blowing. The human body is so packed with miracles of structure and function that it is a wonder that so many bodies work as well as they do for as long as they do. Just the idea that our brains, such a vulnerable collection of mush, can order thought and emotions and memory and love and worship of our Creator is mind-blowing--no pun intended. And to think that some of our bodies carry the capacity to produce other bodies is a concept that we can easily take for granted but should strike us with awe.

I wonder that Paul so embraced his metaphor of the body without even having all of the knowledge in his time that we have today. And yet Paul's metaphor still holds true. If we can

appreciate the miracle and the power of the body, then we can appreciate the miracle and power of the Body of Christ.

Who exactly belongs to the body of Christ? Paul was speaking to the Corinthian church as a teacher or parent. He wanted them to step back and look at themselves since he had left them on their own, and to examine how they had been behaving towards each other. Corinth was a large and prosperous city in the ancient world that had been settled by freed slaves. They had ports on two seas on either side of their land, and prided themselves on being newly rich and upwardly mobile. The Christian congregation founded by Paul was mostly Gentile (non-Jewish) and the Corinthians bragged about their tolerance of diversity. Because they were not bound by Jewish law, as many Jewish Christians considered themselves to be, they indulged themselves in lavish lifestyles and amusements. After Paul left Corinth he got wind of his church behaving in ways that he did not feel were appropriate for his disciples; but Paul was even more concerned that the church had begun to experience divisions within itself—that the behaviors of some were causing suffering for others, and that the greatest threat to the church was disintegration.

There is only one body and one Spirit, and the Spirit dwells in the whole community. Paul wanted the one body of the church to think of itself as the body of Christ, where every part, every limb and organ was necessary for the survival of the whole. It makes sense as a metaphor: when one part of our bodies fails us, it effects our whole person. We have to accommodate our weak and failing parts—sometimes until they go through slow healing, such as after surgery or an infection. Sometimes the accommodation is permanent, as parts of us endure irreparable damage or trauma. We know what it means to be altered, especially as our bodies age and are subject to illness and insult, and to long for a time when we were healthy and whole, when we could walk farther, work harder, think more clearly.

What Paul seems to be saying is that the whole body is still essential and valuable, even though it carries scars and weaknesses and disappointments and pain. Just as we still need to slog through life with the bodies we have--still honoring them, treasuring them, being grateful for the life we have--we still need to slog through life as the body of Christ—with our scars and weaknesses and disappointments and pain. We still need to treasure all that we are and whatever

gifts each of us continue to bring to the table. These gifts, however large or small, however powerful or vulnerable, are given to each person by God for a reason; they each count for something essential and important and have the capacity to bring grace and healing to every other member of the body of Christ and to the church.

This is true for ourselves, our congregation, our diocese, the whole Episcopal Church, and for our brothers and sisters in every Christian denomination in every tiny town and large city. It is true for those who see the world and the church as we do and for those who might not. We all need each other; the body of Christ is bigger than we think, even bigger than we know.

In our gospel today we heard an early and very public declaration of Jesus that goes to the very heart and purpose of a common life in God. Jesus had gone home to Nazareth in Galilee, and stood up to read from the prophet Isaiah saying out loud to those who had known him since he was a boy, that *he* was the one about whom Isaiah had been speaking, admitting that *he was anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.* This would have been a challenge for people from his old neighborhood to hear; rather more natural for them to discount this young local man like they would discount those poor, captive, blind and oppressed others that he championed. Isaiah was foretelling what the Body of Christ would look like; Jesus was affirming his prophesy, birthing a new way for God's people to live with their God and with one another through his own sacrificed and resurrected body.

From the beginning, the Body of Christ has been intended to include everyone--the suffering, the poor, the oppressed, the confused, the doubters, the sinners and the saints. When the miracle of life in God happens--when the Body of Christ manages to come together in spite of its wounds, its scars and its imperfections--to value and hold up all its members, to cherish all their gifts, then it is fully alive. No matter how uncertain, how small, how poor, or how diverse our life becomes as the Body of Christ, our strength will always be found in our unity, our commitment to reconciliation with one another, our honoring and loving one another through our difficulties and our differences, our holding one another through suffering and sorrow, and our rejoicing with one another through moments of beauty and joy. May our prayer this day be that we all be made One in Christ Jesus. Amen.