

SLD01.24.10 3rd Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
I Corinthians 12:12-31
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“Body Parts”

How often have you heard the passage about how the body has many members, and the many members comprise only one body? About how the church is the body of Christ, and all of us, despite our seemingly infinite variety, are members of that body?

Maybe you’ve heard it so often it goes without saying.

But few things go without saying by the Apostle Paul, especially when he’s on a roll. And in his first letter to the errant and upsetting church in Corinth, Paul is flat on a roll.

It’s a new church in Corinth, a young church, more of an NCD (New Church Development), than a chartered communion. One Paul had planted himself. And things had started out so well, too. Passionate believers, those Greeks, genuine seekers with open hearts and heady ideas and a fervent determination to become disciples of Jesus. Every time Paul caught wind of what that on-fire crowd was up to in Corinth, his heart lifted. Until, that is, the wind brought news that was not so favorable.

Word was that things weren’t going so well in Corinth these days. That folks weren’t getting along, weren’t *harmonizing* exactly; in fact, the skinny was that their fervor to outdo one another in worshipping God had morphed into *one-upping* each other, their enthusiasm for the Lord into an unpleasant *competition* for divine favor, as they fussed and fumed over whose spiritual gifts were the more valuable.

Those who spoke in tongues thought they had it all over those who merely interpreted what they were saying, while those who had the gift of healing found the

administrators boring and irrelevant. The highly educated, Paul had heard, regarded the “miracle-workers” as mere sideshow material filling time until the arrival of the wise and honey-tongued.

“Folks, there’s all *kinds* of spiritual gifts,” Paul has just counseled the Corinthians. “All manner of ways God blesses people with ways of serving God. One person’s given faith, another person’s given wisdom, another, prophesy, another, tongues – all given by the same God, and all for the *common good*, hear? (Not your personal aggrandizement.) Get *over yourselves!*” *Everybody’s* got something to offer, see, and what it all comes from the same Spirit.

So maybe the Corinthians don’t get it the first or second or third time. Maybe what God’s trying to do with them as a whole group doesn’t quite sink in. Maybe the “many gifts, one spirit” approach is too theoretical, too pie-in-the-sky, for these practical Greeks, and they just sort of look at Paul quizzically like “what is this guy talking about?” Maybe they need something more concrete, more tangible, easier to relate to, to understand the relationship of the parts to the whole; the whole to the parts.

So Paul tries again, this time using what he hopes is a more accessible analogy – the relationship between the human body and its body parts – spelling out very carefully, and thoroughly, and somewhat repetitively, in today’s text from I Corinthians 12:12-31, a different way of understanding what God is up to in Corinth. He says,

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. 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.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 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? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

Now you can't get any more straightforward than that. All the parts of the body are God-given, God-blessed and God-arranged. All have a special role in the body, and each one, regardless of size or function, is equally valuable. Not only that, but all the body parts are *dependent* on each other, *relate* to each other, *need* each other in ways they don't often think about, in order for the whole body to function properly. In fact,

...the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 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; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

God's doing something with the body, see. What's going on is about more than just the sum of the individual parts. It's about their relationship to one another, and what God does with it. Sure, the Corinthians have gotten it by now. I mean, they're not *stupid*. But does Paul give 'em a break? Oh no, he does not. Just in case anyone could possibly have missed his point, Paul goes on:

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (Duh.)

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. (Is this helpful, Paul? It sounds awfully like a hierarchy. Better stop while you're ahead.)

"Are all apostles?" he goes on. "Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way." (which we'll talk about next week.)

But what we and the Corinthians are accountable for *this* week is what might be regarded as Paul's admittedly tedious yet perhaps more insightful than it first appears, first-century stab at systems theory. Systems theory. You know, that ubiquitous interdisciplinary theory about the nature of complex systems in nature, society and science? Systems theory first originated in biology in the 1920s out of the need to explain the interrelatedness of organisms in ecosystems,¹ but now it seems like you run into it everywhere you go – science, business, education, entertainment, sociology, *ecclesiology* (that's the study of how the church works.)

The idea, put simply, is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. You line up ten parts and just let 'em sit there and not much happens – you've just got ten parts. But you get those parts interacting with each other and something happens. A lot of things happen. The parts affect each other; they, themselves, change, are they themselves even affected by the observer, and voila, suddenly manifest this "whole," this dynamic something that somehow is more than the mere sum of its parts.

Somehow $1 + 1 + 1 = 5$.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Systems_theory#General_systems_research_and_systems_inquiry

Take key lime pie. No question but that a grocery bag of egg yolks, lime juice, condensed milk and graham cracker crust doesn't hold a candle to a freshly baked key lime pie, right?

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts, right? We all know that.

Only we don't always act like it. At least the Corinthians didn't. The reason why Paul was writing them was because some of them were acting like certain parts were greater, more important, more valued, than others. And not just by them, by God!

And the reverse was true, too. Some parts were less important, less valuable, less important, less worthy of notice.

When I was thirteen and working my first job at the YMCA, a friend accidentally dropped an uneven parallel bar on my right great toe and broke it. The pain took my breath away, not just then, but for several days after. In fact, for a good long while after that accident, my body became all toe. In fact, the whole of my existence revolved around, focused on, was enfolded by, and anchored in, my broken right great toe. For a I didn't see, feel or think about anything else. If someone were to introduce me during that time, they'd have had to say, "I'd like you to meet my friend, Jill's broken right toe," because that's all I was.

Of course, that *wasn't* all I was; it just felt that way. Suffering will do that.

Like when there's conflict in the church, and that conflict sucks up all the attention and energy and oxygen in the room. Never mind that the church's left toe is working just fine, that its eyes are sharp enough to see into God's future, that its ears are open to holy wisdom, that its voices are busy making music, or its hands, repairing

Ms. Brown's home, or its hearts, praying for the suffering of the world – suddenly the whole body of Christ becomes that throbbing, aching, bruised and broken right toe.

But that's not the truth, says Paul. That's not how it really is with the human body, never mind the body of Christ. Whether damaged or healthy, suffering or thriving, full or empty, the body is just never all toe, or all hand, or all head, or even all heart. It's the sum of those and how they interact, plus whatever God is up to with that jumble of interacting parts.

And *that's* the *real* mystery. A mystery science is beginning to describe for us in fascinating ways.

For the view that the whole is more than the sum of its parts has not always been generally accepted.

In 1687, British mathematician and natural philosopher, Sir Isaac Newton planted the seeds of a new world view by reducing the laws of the universe to four simple algebraic formulas. So doing, Newton revealed a solar system that worked like a vast machine, a machine, he said, that was made of many parts, some of them as small as an atom, others as huge as the sun, all obeying the same four laws. ...He gave God credit for those laws, says author and preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, mind you, but in fact, the laws themselves left very little for a deity to do. In an article entitled *Physics and Faith*, Taylor remarks that, once Newton had the floor, "as far as the universe was concerned, God's job was mostly like that of a night watchman: someone who dozed in a lawn chair while the stars spun in their courses overhead."²

²<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=574> "Physics and Faith: The Luminous Web" by Barbara Brown Taylor from an article in the *Christian Century*, 6/2/99, pp 612- 619.

And we human beings were so charmed by the elegance and predictability of Newton's laws that we began to see ourselves as machines, too, and built our institutions accordingly, like great machines which, if only each of us would do our parts, should keep on humming. There's no mystery to a machine, after all. A machine is perfectly predictable. If something breaks down, any reasonably competent mechanic should be able to locate the problem and set things right.³

And what do you know but that religion itself took on this mechanical worldview as we conjured a predictable, biddable God who responds to our prayerful desires and comfortably absolves us when we say we're sorry. If the atom were the irreducible building block of Newton's clockwork universe, individual humans became the predictable building units for all social enterprises. Nations, communities, church and families were all seen to be reducible to the individuals who made them up. And when the whole is regarded as nothing more than the sum of its parts, and something goes wrong, why, you just fix the offending part, right?

But science has come upon another way of conceiving systems, one more along the lines of what Paul is trying convey to the confused Corinthians. "Not a clockwork universe in which individuals function as discrete springs and gears, but one that looks more like what Brown Taylor describes as a luminous web, in which the whole is far more than the parts. According to this view, there is no such thing as an individual apart from his or her relationships. And every relationship, every interaction, between people and people, between people and things, between things and things – affects that web. In such a universe, life can no longer be reduced to four sure-fire rules, but becomes an ever-unfolding mystery that defies precise prediction.

³ Ibid.

This view of the workings of the universe is rooted in the ever-shifting science of quantum physics, in whose disorienting world a thing can be more than two things at once, or perhaps even three. Through the lens of quantum physics, life itself “shape shifts” as even the observer observes. Perhaps even in relation to the observation.

if I had all afternoon, I couldn't help make sense of that. Ask Scott or Brent or Debbie about subatomic particles and field theory and the EPR paradox. But here are two principles with which I limp away from quantum physics: that physical reality refuses to be compartmentalized into parts, and that, because of the dynamics of the relationship of the parts with one another and everything else, plus throw in a little chaos to keep things interesting, life, the whole, the universe, is not predictable.

I'm in way over my head here – wouldn't venture here at all if Barbara Brown Taylor hadn't gone first and weren't holding my hand. But listen to what quantum physicist, David Bohm, has to say. He says that it is no longer possible to see it as a collection of autonomous parts, as Newton did, existing separately while interacting. The deeper revelation Bohm says, as Paul did, is one of undivided wholeness.⁴

Or, as 13th century Sufi poet Jelaluddin Rumi weighs in, “You think, because you understand *one* that you also understand *two*, because one and one make two. But you must also understand *and*.”

Let's go back to Paul's metaphor of the church as Christ's body. Taylor says, “As different as we are and as many functions as we serve, we are far more than a collections of parts. ...We may act that way sometimes, with the left side pulling against the right and the feet refusing to take a step until the hands have apologized, but there are also time when we clearly participate in some form of *communion* – that puts us in

⁴ Ibid. p.10

touch with a “head” (think Christ as the head of the church) a head much more capable than our own. This is not something that happens to us only person by person but something that happens to all of us at once. There is no explanation for it in terms of cause and effect – there is no voice that speaks through a p.a. system or sends directions via GPS, but plenty of us have experienced the communication as real.”

There are certain moments in the life of a faith community in which we know that, in which we are aware that we have become a great deal more than the sum of our individual parts. That something is happening to the whole of us, *with* the whole of us, something uncontrollable and unpredictable but relational and dynamic and true. And one of those times is when we publicly claiming God’s grace in the sacrament of baptism. When we take a person, infant, child or adult, and place them in the middle of our collective heart, confess what we believe and claim God’s unconditional love for them, and covenant together to accompany and support that one on his spiritual journey. Something greater than you and I individually is going on. All you and I can offer, really, is our intention, our hope, our promise. But when we come together as the body of Christ and set that intention, then that One who is above all, and through all, and in all (Eph. 4:6) makes of us and our vows something much more than we are as body parts. Something set in the center of a luminous and infinite web of relationships, a web “flung across the vastness of space like a luminous net,” and made, not of thread but of energy.

And where are we in this picture? asks Taylor. “All over the place. Up there. Down here. Inside our skin and out. ...part of a web that is pure relationship, with energy available to us that has been around since the universe was born.

“And where is God is in this picture? All over the place. Up there. Down here. Inside our skin and out. God is the web, the energy, the space, the light, not captured in them...but revealed in that singular, vast net of relationship that animates everything that is. God is not just responsible for that unity; God *is* that unity. *That’s* what we claim in baptism, our inclusion, *all* our inclusion in the unity of love and healing and redemption that we know through Christ Jesus. In baptism we enter the luminous web of life itself as God claims us as God’s beloved ones, and puts a sign on us to show us that we belong to God. In the mystery of baptism, God unites us with Jesus Christ and with one another, freeing us from sin and death. In baptism, we are made members of the body of Christ, a body that is more, so much more, than the sum of its parts.

To the glory of God. Amen.

This is different than models that focus on individual parts as separate from the whole, instead of recognizing the relationship and interdependence among the parts that enable the whole to function.

Now, perhaps, Paul is sounding a little less elementary.