

Common Unity sermon series  
Body Language - I Cor. 12:12-27  
Oct. 30, 2022  
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A few weeks ago in a sermon I mentioned in passing I wrecked my bike. Since then, several of you have reached out to ask how I'm doing and if I'm ok. Aww! And by several of you, I mean none of you. I'm fine, by the way! The wreck was a bit embarrassing and not really something I want to talk about...ok, fine, if you insist, I'll tell you what happened.

Amy and I both had our old bikes restored recently, so we wanted to take them for a spin. We decided on Labor Day to ride the Legacy Trail, which we can bike to from our house, and rode the 10 miles out to the horse park. Now, I love riding a bike, but I had not ridden more than one or two miles in decades, so by the time we got to the horse park, I had some aches and pains where I didn't even know I had muscles.

On the way back, some mean-looking clouds rolled in, about three miles into our return journey, the skies opened up. It monsooned so hard I saw fish putting on raincoats. We had no choice but to keep going, so we powered through until we reached our destination, the glowing reservoir of goodness that is West Sixth Brewery. As we approached the brewery, I decided I was going to hop my bike up onto the curb so I could park it and go in. Now, when I was 25, I could have done that in my sleep. But the muscles that used to do that so well had all met and decided simultaneously to go on strike. So instead of hopping up onto the curb, my tire hit the curb and I went down on the sidewalk. Hard. In front of the plate glass windows of West Sixth, behind which was a room full of young people watching in horror as this feeble old man crashes spectacularly in front of them.

What's the first thing you do when you fall? It's what I did. You take inventory. OK, what hurts? What's bleeding? Is anything broken? Is anything missing? After a quick scan I realized the only injuries I suffered were some bad scrapes and a horrifically bruised ego, but in about an hour, I hurt all over. I didn't fall on my lower back, why did it hurt so much? As we continue our sermon series called "Common Unity," we're going to talk today about the connectedness of the body and how each part matters to the health of the whole.

This is a much tougher topic to preach on today than it was a few years ago. Before the pandemic, we could count on the fact that our church family would gather in one place each Sunday to reconnect, to hear God's word, to pass communion through our midst. No matter how disconnected we felt during the week, we knew for a fact that on Sunday morning, we could re-establish that connection.

But then Covid introduced a nasty virus into the body, and suddenly our connections were reduced to seeing faces in little boxes on a screen, if we were connecting at all. And even though we are through the worst of the pandemic, each Sunday morning that worship connection happens through a modem and wi-fi rather than a handshake and a hug. And I can tell you for sure that this body suffers when even one of our members isn't with us. We are not complete without you.

There's a scientific theory that says all of creation is in a web of connectivity, and a subtle shift in one part of the web can have a ripple effect of great magnitude on other parts of the web. The famous example is that a butterfly sneeze in America could cause a tsunami in China. Scientists call this radical connectivity Chaos Theory. Paul calls it the body of Christ.

Our passage from I Corinthians is one of Paul's more famous examples of what it means to be a Christian, and believe me, the Corinthians needed it, because this was one messed-up church, filled with conflict and misinterpretation of the gospel. You had affluent members looking down on their weaker counterparts, the Lord's Supper was being co-opted into a spiritual competition, and the church was fragmented. That's why Paul talks to this congregation about being connected as the body of Christ.

The use of the body metaphor was not new to Paul. Greco-Roman philosophers had been using it for years to describe the status of the city-state, what they called the body politic. The difference is that in the pagan culture, the body metaphor was used to squash individual expression and coerce people into conforming to the world's values. In other words, for the good of the state, don't be yourself. But Paul transforms the metaphor by using it to encourage individual expression in the midst of the larger unifying structure of the church. In other words, for the good of the body, be the self God created you to be. The more you are authentically you, the more God can use you to change the world.

Paul is trying to help the conflicted Corinthians understand that everyone in the church had a gift to give, from the wealthiest aristocrat to the lowliest slave, and those individual gifts should be honored as equal. Some people were trying to keep others from being a part of the church. To them, Paul says, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'We don't need you!'" And other people were feeling like their gifts didn't matter. "Because I'm not an eye, I'm not part of the body." To which Paul says, "Being a lesser-known body part still means you are part of the body." Everyone has a gift, and everyone needs to share the gift in order for the body to function as it was created. If you can speak in public, you have a gift. If you can wash dishes, you have a gift. If you can smile at a child, you have a gift. Every gift matters.

It's easy for us to forget that, because we take for granted a lot of the parts of our own bodies. I bet we can't name half the things that keep our bodies functioning, and we probably never think about them until they stop working or need to be surgically removed. The rest of the time, they just do their job, functioning as God created them to function. It's kind of ironic that some of our most prominent body parts are of lesser importance, while the hidden parts are essential. Which would you rather have: an well-rounded nose or a functioning liver? Both are part of the body, both of jobs to do, and the body is incomplete without either one. I don't really care which one is more aesthetically appealing. It's all a part of me, and I don't think about everything going on inside of me to keep me upright and breathing.

That works fine when I'm talking about my physical body. The problem comes when you extend that metaphor to relationships and you put me in a community with a bunch of other people who look, think, smell, talk, and act differently than me. As pastor Barbara Brown Taylor said, "We don't handle the infinite variety outside of us nearly as well as we handle the infinite variety inside of us. Too often the brains expect everyone else to act like brains and the heart expects everyone else to act like hearts and there's always a hangnail that brings out the hangnail in everyone else." This is true of every church, from Corinth to Crestwood. The earlobe believes one thing, the kneecap believes another, and the armpit just wants to make a stink.

This is where Paul's metaphor is so instructive. He says the priorities we bring with us to church are not in competition with each other. They are all a part of what it means to be the body. We need to focus on outreach and children's ministry, on opening our doors to guests and hiring the right personnel, on doing ministry now and planning for the future. All of the things we do as a church are representative of the diverse roles of the body, and the gifts we contribute help us to live out our call to serve God and love each other.

That highlights the wonderful paradox which Paul addresses with the Corinthians. We are all individuals with our own unique gifts, and yet we are called to use them in conjunction with everyone else's gifts. It's like a chain of paper dolls that are connected together. You can decorate each individual doll however you would like, but they must still remain connected to each other to be a chain. As soon as you disconnect one, the whole chain falls. In order to maintain the wholeness of the body, we each must live out our individual gifts.

We need each other. We need the strong and the weak. We need the rich and the not-so-rich. We need the young and the wise. We need the foreheads and the pinkie toes. We need each and every one of us to do our part to contribute to the health of the body. Not only does this help us fulfill our call to be unified in the midst of our diversity, but it also models to our fragmented world what it means to be in true relationship with each other, to rejoice with each other and to suffer with each other.

That connectedness of the body is lived out every time we come to the communion table. Each Sunday when we do so, we re-enact the night of the Last Supper, when Jesus took bread, blessed it, and broke it, and said, "This is my body." The body of Christ was broken for us, and we are made whole through it. We are woven into the body of Christ, connected by spiritual sinew to each other, through Christ's death. Each Sunday when we remember Christ's death, we also re-member Christ's body, making us members once again through the sharing of the meal together. That is true whether we are taking communion here in the sanctuary or at home in your living room. We could easily divide the church up into a number of categories: age, ethnicity, income, stage of life. But through Christ's sacrifice, we are one body. Period.

So we bring our gifts. Some are prominent, like a nose. Some are tiny, like blood cells. But all are necessary. All are required for us to be the body Christ is calling us to be. Don't worry about what someone else is giving. Don't worry if your gift is good enough. Give what you have to give and trust that God will do the rest. There's a Sufi saying that goes, "You think because you understand one you must understand two, because one and one make two. But you must also understand and." God can take the one of each of us and transform us into something so much greater than the sum of our parts. May we live the "and" of our connectivity as we give our gifts to God's use. We ARE the body of Christ.