

E3C 2022 1 Corinthians 12 (13)

[The lectionary split one story from Luke into today's half and next week's half, but they really need to be read together, which is what we'll do next week. The lectionary split one idea from Paul's letter to the Corinthians into this week's half and next week's half, but *they* should really be read together, so that's what we're going to do today.]

Five years ago I underwent an extensive abdominal surgery and was stuck in the hospital for just shy of two months. I lost a lot of weight and muscle, so when I was finally released, I was so weak I could barely walk. I made decent progress with physical therapy, and I had been given no restrictions, so when an occasion arose a few weeks later that required me to drive, I thought I was ready. How much strength could it really take to sit in a car and step on the gas and the brake, right? That was the first time I had driven in maybe three months, and I was behind the wheel for a total of close to five hours. The next day, my whole right side around the surgical area was on fire. I was certain that something internal had come undone; it didn't even occur to me that the driving had anything to do with it. But the physical therapist did a thorough assessment and assured me that I had just worked those healing abdominal muscles a little too much and too quickly; apparently leg muscles are *attached* to abdominal muscles. It turns out you can't just remove a body part without the others being affected. Lesson learned.

That's the metaphor that Paul uses to describe the church: the body of Christ, which though comprised of many members, is yet one body. There is perhaps no place where the communal nature of the Christian faith is clearer than this passage: we simply do not exist in and of ourselves or for ourselves but for the sake of a whole, fully functioning community. I cannot be a foot that says, "I'm not hand so I don't belong to the body" and then do whatever I want, as if my actions have no consequences for others. Nor can I be a head that says to the feet "I have no need of you" and then exclude, exploit, or neglect someone else without repercussions—not just for them but for me. If one of us is honored, everyone rejoices; yet if one of us suffers, all of us suffer together. That's what true community means.

The epistles are a lot like the tag on the hairdryer that warns you not to use it while you're still in the bathtub; it has to be said because somebody has already done it. When Paul writes this description to the church in Corinth, he isn't casting a vision for what they should aspire to be; he is correcting them for the ways in which they have already failed to live into Christian community. The next chapter is the one that is probably even more familiar to you: love is patient, love is kind; it is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude and does not insist on its own way... This is the part the often

gets read at weddings, but it was not written as advice in advance of a marriage. It was Paul admonishing the Corinthians who had already developed some unloving habits in their relationships with one another. Paul knows how human nature leads us to treat one another, and that left to our own devices, we won't treat each other well. In stark contrast, he presents the still more excellent way of Christian community, a way of living that prioritizes the other instead of prioritizing the self, a way that celebrates differences instead of insisting on assimilation, a way that values each and every member for who they are and what they bring to the table. If that sounds counter-cultural, if that sounds difficult, well, that's kind of the point. If we were already living how we were supposed to live, Jesus wouldn't have had to show up and teach us to live differently.

The chapter immediately before this discusses the Corinthians' bad habit of allowing the leisure class to show up early for worship and get a head start on the food and wine, so that by the time the working class arrived, the food had run out and the rich people were already drunk. That's not what God envisions for our human community, especially not for communities that have formed for the express purpose of worshiping the God of justice and abundance. The Corinthians treated some members of their community as though they were dispensable because every human society treats some people that way. But Paul tells them that to be a *Christian* community requires them to think differently, to treat each person as a vital part of the body, because each person is worthy of love. But if that's not reason enough, Paul's body metaphor shows us that when we exclude others, it's not only detrimental to them; as members of the one body, we also hurt *ourselves* when we try to make the body function without some of the parts.

This has been a tough couple of years for our human community. We've seen which body parts our society at large thinks we can function without: the elderly, the chronically ill, the kids who will get sick but probably not *too* sick, their teachers, workers in the service industry, citizens of other countries... We should be horrified that so many people have so little regard for the lives of so many others. Horrified, but not surprised, because even 2000 years ago Paul showed us that that's how humans think. Yet Christ calls us to think differently, and therefore to act differently, because Paul's words about love aren't about warm and fuzzy feelings but concrete acts of selfless care for other people, born from our professed belief that God makes each and every other person in God's image just as God made us. Unlearning our human habits so we can value others the way God values them is a process; changing our whole way of thinking doesn't happen overnight. But while we're working on it, may we remember not to cut off our own feet while we're trying to walk in the way of Jesus.