

The gospel for today is only the first half of the story of Jesus preaching in his hometown of Nazareth. The lectionary spreads this passage over two Sundays, and I want us to look at the entire story as a cohesive whole, so tune in next week. Think of it as a cliff-hanger: in the second half Jesus speaks truth to power and the congregation literally tries to throw him off a cliff.

That leaves us today to wrestle with 1 Corinthians, which has been on my mind because after a few years of having no weddings, I've recently had three inquiries from folks who want to get married, and the passage that always comes up at weddings is 1 Corinthians 13, the appointed epistle for next week. Although Chapter 13 isn't bad marriage advice, Paul was not addressing a bride and groom when he defined love as patient and kind, not envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude and so on. In fact, the word he uses there for love is not *eros* or romantic love, but *agapé*, the love with which God loves us, the love that inspires in us charity, benevolence, and goodwill toward others. Paul's words were not aspirations for two people at the beginning of their union but a correction for the whole church in Corinth that was already divided.

The chapter before today's selection describes one example of the Corinthians' failure to unify. Remember that these early churches started with Jewish believers, and in Jewish tradition, the day began, as Genesis describes, in the evening; so they gathered in the evenings not in sanctuaries but in the homes of believers whose houses were big enough to accommodate the group, for communion services, which were full meals, something like a potluck. In Corinth, those who didn't have to work for a living were gathering first, eating all the good food and drinking all the good wine, so by the time the working members finished their jobs and made their way to worship, there was nothing left to eat and the rest of the congregation was drunk. Paul has to explain why they're wrong not to wait for one another, as if they had been raised with no manners.

But the Corinthians, who were new to Christianity, as were all the recipients of Paul's letters, were not so much lacking in social graces as continuing to live by the same world view they had always known, which did *not* teach them to look at all people as equals. From their perspective, it didn't matter if they fully included all the members of their church in the Lord's Supper because they still looked at the world as being made up of people who count and people who don't count, people who are important and people who are expendable, people who are worthy of attention, respect, and dignity, and people who could easily be excluded under the assumption that they must be less loved by God since they were less loved by the world. That's the way human society had always functioned, and the Corinthians had not yet come to understand that Christ was calling them to a very different way of looking at the world. After all, Jesus taught us to love even our enemies, let alone people who have never done us any harm but who are just, in whatever way, different.

Paul uses perhaps his most famous metaphor comparing the church of Christ to the human body, where every part has a function, and therefore all members are worthy of honor, respect, and care. He reminds them that it was God who arranged all those parts, that the diversity in their community didn't

happen by accident but by God's elegant plan. The body doesn't need uniformity to function; in fact, the body *can't* function if all the parts are the same. It works not by uniformity but by *diversity*: if the whole body were made up of eyes, how could it hear anything? For that reason, no one part of the body can say to another "I have no need of you"—each part very much needs the other. So if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. However, instead of treating all their members like vital parts of the body, the Corinthians were importing the worst aspects of human culture into their spiritual community and treating quite a few members like an appendix.

There is an argument to be made for removing an inflamed appendix before it ruptures and kills the body, but considering the limitations of first century medical knowledge and surgical expertise, that would certainly stretch Paul's metaphor too far beyond its context. What Paul is trying to get the Corinthians to understand is that everybody, even the people the rest of their society taught them to ignore, everybody is vital to the whole, and not *in spite* of their unique identity, but *because of* it. The church, the wider society, even the whole global ecosystem is inherently diverse, and we ignore or try to suppress that diversity at our own peril. Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves, which admittedly sounds like a high ideal; Paul is more practical: if you can't appreciate someone else's intrinsic value as a child of God, at least appreciate their contribution to making the whole body work as God intended, because if they aren't there, and it doesn't work the way it's supposed to, you're going to feel it, too. I'm living without a couple essential parts, and although I'm grateful for the medical advances that allow me to compensate for that, it's been an education in how interconnected our physiology really is. I function, but definitely not the way God intended.

We cannot criticize the Corinthians too harshly. They were not the first to view human society in terms of haves and have-nots, insiders and outsiders, people who count and people who don't. And of course, Paul's lesson didn't stick. For all the enlightenment and progress we might have thought humanity made, we now live in a world that denies the worth, even the basic humanity, of others, right out loud, and that dehumanization leads to terrible harm. But Jesus teaches us something different. I imagine the Corinthians were uncomfortable altering their world view and their daily lives to match the vision Paul cast, even though he was exhorting them to the good life that God intended; but nobody said it would be easy. I've had a few friends lately who have badly needed orthopedic surgery. I spoke to one a few days after his operation, and he reported that everything hurt—everything except the surgical site. To keep from using the injured joint, he had been moving the wrong way for so long that moving the right way initially felt unnatural and hurt. But with practice, he's getting there. The world certainly does not teach us to be a coherent body that values every member such that we have no dissension among us; quite the opposite. But God calls us to the uncomfortable transformation of our perspective and practice for the sake of each other, for the sake of ourselves, and for good of the world. May God give us the strength and courage to answer that call.