

Our text this morning comes from I Cor. 12. We've listened to it already; we've been meditating on this wonderful text already—and in a moment, I'm going to read it again. But first I want to give you a little background to fill in more of the story, so we know what was the context into which Paul wrote these words.

The city of Corinth was a prominent city in the ancient world. It was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, in the southernmost part of the Greek peninsula. It was also strategically located on the trade routes. So Corinth was a bustling, prosperous, cosmopolitan place. It drew a lot of immigrants, and because of this, it was a city of much diversity—ethnic diversity, cultural diversity, religious diversity, socio-economic diversity. There were some wealthy prominent citizens, but most of the people were poor and not always treated well. In a lot of ways, the city of Corinth in the ancient world is like the city of Chicago today.

Early in the year 50, Paul arrived in Corinth and began to found the church there. In later years, in the midst of Paul's travels, he maintained a vigorous correspondence with the body of believers in Corinth. We have pieces of that correspondence in our New Testament, and the letters to the Corinthians open up for us a little window onto the Corinthian church.

From this we learn that the church mirrored the diversity present in the city, particularly the economic diversity. There were a few wealthy, prominent members, but most of the members of the church were of a lower social class. As Paul writes at the beginning of the letter to the Corinthians: "Not many of you were noble, not many of you were wise, not many of you were wealthy." So this is what the church was like: a lot of diversity, socio-economic stratification, and with that, not surprisingly, came divisions and disputes. The letter we know as I Corinthians, Paul wrote to address some of those disputes, and the overarching theme of this letter is the question: how can we be community together?

With this context in mind, let's listen again to I Corinthians 12:12-26.

[scripture text]

I love this image of the church as a body. At the time when Paul wrote, this figure of speech was current in the culture, used often to describe the Roman state: one body with many members. Paul picked up on this figure of speech and applied it to the church. And it's easy for me to imagine why—it is a beautiful metaphor.

On the one hand, it conveys essential, organic unity. We know this from experience with our own bodies. If, for example, we accidentally smash our elbow or our toe into the doorframe as we're trying to get out the door, the sudden sharp pain we feel becomes the focus of our entire concentration. It's impossible for our brain to go on thinking whatever thought it was occupied with before and to simply ignore the injured member that's in pain.

At the same time, the image of the church as a body also communicates amazing and necessary diversity. Again, we know this from our bodies. The various organs of our body—the hand, the eye, the lung, the stomach—these are very different organs, each with its own function. And it's because of this very diversity that each one is absolutely necessary.

So this is a beautiful image for talking about the church and communicating the unity and the diversity that must be present in the church. I love this metaphor. But—when it comes to the flesh-and-blood, skin-and-bone reality of my own body and other people’s bodies... that sometimes is a little harder to love.

I’ve been thinking about why this is. Our bodies are earthy. Our bodies, more than our minds, remind us and keep us conscious of our limits. Quite frankly, our bodies can be messy. Embarrassing. If we think of the classic “most embarrassing moments,” how many of them have to do with being embodied? Things like tripping on the curb and falling down in front of someone we wanted to impress. Having gas at an inappropriate moment. Involuntarily burping in public. Sometimes it is hard to love the body.

Those of us who have inherited the legacy of American Protestantism are not much helped in this by our religious heritage. American Protestantism often encourages us to ignore the body and focus on the mind and spirit. Meanwhile, popular culture swirling around us is at the other extreme, where bodies in all their raw physicality and sexuality are prominent and everywhere in our face—and that’s not necessarily much help, either. There is much in our culture that teaches us to indulge our bodies, or pamper our bodies. There’s not a lot that teaches us to *love* our bodies. On the contrary, the media and advertising have built an industry on encouraging discontentment with our bodies.

The truth is, many of us know well this discontentment. A lot of us could pretty readily make lists of the different parts of our body we’re not so happy with, either because they don’t look the way we wish they looked, or they don’t function the way we think they ought to function. You know the kinds of lists I’m talking about. The parts of the body that are too skinny or too fat, the nose that’s too big, the chin that’s too small, the hair that is unmanageably curly, or uninterestingly straight, or the wrong color, or disappearing too quickly, the arthritic joints that just don’t function the way we want them to... The list could go on and on. It is challenging to love all the members of our bodies.

A very different vision appears in the text of I Corinthians 12. In verse 22, Paul writes, “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.” I read this and think, *Oh, what a beautiful vision. How inspiring.* And yet how rarely, how *rarely* we live this vision. We don’t live it with our physical bodies. And all too rarely do we live it in the church as a body.

It’s similar there, isn’t it? There are so many members of the church body that seem hard for the church to love. Members that get perceived as weaker, or less respectable. And we could make a similar list, couldn’t we?

In a lot of churches, those of us who are gay or lesbian or otherwise at variance from the heterosexual norm—the church doesn’t really know what to do with us, and maybe excludes us, ignores us, tries to pretend we’re not there. But it’s a rare church that actually treats its gay and lesbian members with greater honor, with more respect. Or perhaps the neglected members of

the body are those who are differently abled, developmentally challenged, mentally ill. In how many churches are these members perceived and received as indispensable parts of the body?

Even the churches that do exceptionally well in including and welcoming a great diversity of people—even these churches still have members that just feel hard to love. The socially awkward people, the ones who keep saying the wrong thing at the wrong moment. The ones who somehow seem kind of earthy, embarrassing, socially messy. It is challenging to love all the individual members of the body.

Yet I am convinced it is impossible for us to love the body as a whole unless we are able to love the individual members in the body. We need to learn to do this. We need to learn to do this with our physical bodies, and in the body that is the church.

How do we learn to love the members of the body? I brought a poem this morning that I find a great example of that, a poem written by Lucille Clifton, a wonderful African American woman poet. This particular poem she has written to push against the culturally prescribed standards of beauty. The poem is called “homage to my hips”¹:

these hips are big hips.
they need space to
move around in.
they don't fit into little
petty places. these hips
are free hips.
they don't like to be held back.
these hips have never been enslaved,
they go where they want to go
they do what they want to do.
these hips are mighty hips.
these hips are magic hips.
i have known them
to put a spell on a man and
spin him like a top!

It is a marvelous poem, a profound and provocative piece. I like this poem so much because in it Clifton is not offering empty praise. Rather, she has taken the time and paid attention enough to let the very real beauty and power of her hips emerge. This, I think, is key to learning how to love the body.

My friend Carol is a professor of literature and writing, and she sometimes teaches this poem in her classes. When she does, she gives her students an assignment, asking them to write a homage to a part of their bodies. She says, “Don't pick the parts of your bodies that you feel good about, that you ordinarily think are attractive fine features. Instead, pick one of the body

¹ “homage to my hips” appears in Lucille Clifton’s poetry collection *two-headed woman* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).

parts off that list—a part that, well, you’re not so crazy about. Think about that body part, and write a homage to it.”

I want to encourage us to do this as a spiritual discipline. I want to encourage you to do this, whether your homage takes the form of writing a poem, or sharing with a friend, or speaking words aloud, or praying a blessing. Take time to be present and attentive to your bodies. Do this as a spiritual discipline.

I’m very much in earnest when I say this because I am convinced that God loves our bodies. We see this often in the Old Testament. Our call to worship this morning was taken from Psalm 139. I want to read a couple of verses from that psalm, vv. 13 and 14. The psalmist, addressing God, says, “For it was you who formed my inward parts. You knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” There’s a beautiful close attention that God pays to our bodies, in intimate detail. God loves our bodies.

We see this perhaps nowhere more clearly than in the Incarnation, in the Word made flesh, in Jesus’ ministry. Particularly in the gospel of Luke, so many of the stories of Jesus’ healings include mention of Jesus touching the person he was healing. Jesus comes near and touches the leper. Jesus lays his hands on the back of the crippled woman. Jesus is willing to get close to other people’s bodies.

As we study the ministry of Jesus, this is the point where it comes together: the importance of loving physical, material bodies and the importance of loving the body of the church. It’s not *just* a beautiful metaphor. I really believe that the more we learn to love our own bodies—not despite their earthiness, but in the midst of their real earthiness—the more we learn to love our own bodies, the more we become a people of grace and attentive care who can truly love our brothers and our sisters in all of their embodied reality.

This morning let me leave you with this question. Who are the members among us who need such grace, such care, such love? Are we willing to take the time, to pay attention and be present with them, to let their very real beauty emerge? Apart from the culturally prescribed categories, apart from the standards we’ve received, can we let their real beauty emerge, and receive that and welcome that? It’s only in this way, I believe, that the vision laid out in I Corinthians 12 becomes reality. Only in this way do we reach the point where we live into this vision Paul describes: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it. If one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”