

Clothed With Greater Honor
[1 Corinthians 12:12-26](#)
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It was a hot, humid day this past July, and I was walking the sidewalks of a nice suburb of Pittsburgh. I passed a salon, and the thought occurred to me that I desperately needed a haircut, more than I had ever needed one in my life. I pushed the door open and walked inside, greeted immediately by the aroma of expensive hair products.

I approached the reception desk and asked if they could take a walk-in appointment. They could, and I soon found myself in the capable hands of a young woman named Leah.

As Leah sat me down at the hair washing station and draped the nylon cape around my shoulders, I suddenly felt really embarrassed.

See, my hair was... not OK. I hadn't really been taking care of myself the last few months. I'd been distracted, consumed by other things, falling asleep late and waking up early without combing my hair or washing it for days at a time. I'd just twist everything into a bun and hope for the best, which made the whole thing worse.

Will and I have this ancient cat, Boaz, who has stopped grooming himself. If we don't brush him, his coat becomes badly matted; I was well on my way to becoming the human version of Boaz.

I said to Leah, "I've had a really terrible few months. I haven't been paying attention to my hair, and it's kind of a mess. It's so bad I can't get the tangles out myself."

Leah, bless her heart, was not phased at all. "Not a problem. I've seen worse," she said, dumping about a half a bottle of conditioner on my head.

Here's the thing: I forgot I was back on the East Coast. Leah did not demonstrate the Midwestern restraint to which I've become accustomed. As she worked, she began to pepper me with questions. What do you do, are you married, do you have kids. Then came one I was dreading.

"So where do you live?" she asked.

I took a breath and admitted that I was from Minnesota.

"Wow! Really? What are you doing in Pittsburgh?"

I felt like I owed her an explanation for the state of my hair.

“My husband’s at the hospital, at UPMC,” I said. “He’s really sick.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “What’s wrong with him?”

There was a pause, as I thought about how to answer that question. I was so tired, more tired than I’d ever been in my life.

“He has cancer,” I said.

There you have it. Pastors lie. (Sometimes.)

Now, I should say this: it was not a lie I told lightly. I know the devastation of cancer quite intimately. A brain tumor took my sister at age 40.

But in that moment, with my head cradled in the hands of a stranger, saying that my spouse had cancer was much, much easier than telling the far more complex truth.

Or, to put it another way, saying that Will had cancer was a way to *get* at the truth, to translate the truth into more socially-acceptable terms, terms that made me feel far less vulnerable.

See, all of this was true: a terrible malignancy was at work in Will’s body and mind. He was dying. For the past two months, I had been keeping him alive, coaxing him to eat a few hundred calories a day, while fighting to get him professional help. We learned, to our horror, that nowhere in Minnesota offered the level of medical services he needed. Will was so sick that he required far more specialized care, the kind only offered in a few places around the country.

Thanks to a personal connection, we *finally* found our way to the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

However, the disease afflicting Will was not cancer.

It was, and is, an eating disorder.

Eating disorders are diseases of the body and mind. Eating disorders are complicated; they take many forms and have many causes. We carry certain stereotypes about who gets them—and why—but they can affect all kinds of people, including the person I love most in this world.

I’m not going to lie to you now: it’s really hard for me to talk about this. The story is still fresh and still unfolding. Will is much, much better, thanks be to God. I look at him and I see a miracle. He has fought so hard, and I’m so proud of him. But, as so many of you know, recovery from anything is a long process, and not perfectly linear.

And I'm recovering too. I went through some of the most harrowing experiences of my life this summer.

This is also hard to talk about because it's so sensitive, so private. I'm protective of this story. Protective of Will. Protective of myself. Protective of the journey we've been on together, which feels sacred to me. We've been through something together that is hard to put into words, let alone share with a huge group of people.

And I'll be even more honest: It's hard to be vulnerable with you. I worry about overwhelming you with my story. I worry about being too intense, too strange, *too much*. I worry that you'll receive my story with confusion or discomfort or—and this is the one I really don't want—*pity*.

But I can't control how you react. I have to do what I think we all have to do with those kinds of worries: let them go. I imagine giving these anxieties over to God, where they can be held by God, leaving my container with space for other things.

I need space for things; for rest. For renewal. For hope.

And. I have to remember: *you* all are *not* hair stylists I've literally just met.

You're my church.

We're here in the name of something much bigger than ourselves, in the name of this shared enterprise of faith. We're here because we want to be filled by grace, which we receive from God and from one another.

You are my church, so I want to relate to you differently.

It's helpful in this moment to turn to the best metaphor for the church that we have, courtesy of Paul: the body of Christ. I love how Paul really goes for it. He declares that the church is the literal body of Christ, with hands and feet and eyes and everything.

And it's a playful metaphor! Paul invites us to imagine the body parts talking and having little conversations with each other, eye to hand, head to feet. He also offers the rather horrifying image of a freestanding, sentient eyeball, all-seeing but lacking all the other qualities that make a human.

These absurdities are meant to make us laugh, I think, and draw our attention to something that we take for granted: the way our bodies are made up of diverse parts that naturally cooperate in order to function as a whole.

That's how the *church* is supposed to function, Paul argues. A cooperative of members, all unique, all with different gifts and roles, working together to extend the Good News of God's love on earth, as Jesus did.

But Paul also does not shy away from some of the more difficult implications of his metaphor. He is aware of the fact that humans hide certain parts of our bodies, those that seem “to be weaker” or “less honorable” or “less respectable.” Some translations refer to these as “unpresentable parts,” or “uncomely parts,” or even “shameful parts.”

You might think Paul is talking about modesty and propriety, which can be good things, and appropriate in many contexts. But this is about more than that; Paul is *also* talking about the human tendency to withhold certain parts of ourselves, to cover up truths, to wish they didn’t exist in the first place because they are so intimate or uncomfortable that we don’t know how they will be received by others.

This metaphor extends far beyond our physical bodies. It extends to our stories. Our wounds. Our roles within a community. Paul is referring to any aspects of our lives that aren’t pretty or convenient or straightforward, that don’t blend easily into what we think community is supposed to be.

So what is the church to do with these parts, according to Paul?

Well, the church is *not* to ignore them.

The church is *not* to treat them as dispensable.

Instead, the church must do the opposite.

The church must treat them with respect.

The church must clothe them in greater honor.

So here we are. I am sharing a story, a part of myself, a reality of my life that *feels* “unpresentable” in its complexity and tenderness. My unpresentable summer hair. My unpresentable family situation. I’m sharing this part of myself with this Body of Christ, trusting that you will clothe me with honor.

What does that mean?

It means that I’m trusting you to hold this story with care.

It means that I’m trusting you to respect the boundaries that I place around this story: what I choose to tell, and what I choose not to tell.

I’m trusting you to treat Will with love and dignity when he returns to church.

I'm trusting you to continue to see me as your pastor, no more, no less; while recognizing that I'm carrying a heavy burden right now, one that limits me in some ways.

And finally, I'm trusting you to trust *me* when I say that I have support and tools to help me lighten this burden over time.

All these things would honor me greatly.

I should note, by the way, that Leah, the hair stylist, ended up honoring me too. She may not have had the full story, the whole truth, but she knew enough for that moment. She gave me a lovely scalp massage and a very good haircut. It's too bad I can't go back to her, because I don't live in Pittsburgh (and also I lied to her).

Paul wraps up his metaphor by declaring, "God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another."

This is a nice thought, but I have to push back against him a little. There is *always* dissension within the body, whether we're talking about an individual body or a corporate one. It's the human condition. To be alive, to be in community, is a messy endeavor, one that we never quite get right.

But Paul is absolutely on target in this regard: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

It's an honor to be your pastor, and to be honored by you. And for that, I rejoice.

Amen.