

The Body of Christ
Rev. Cindy Maddox
January 20, 2022

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

When Paul used the image of the body to describe the church, the recipients of his letter were not surprised.

They were accustomed to hearing *the body* used as a metaphor in philosophical and political rhetoric.

From Plato to Cicero to Josephus,

the body was often used as a representation of society.

“Generally it was a metaphor for the necessity of political unity and the danger of protest. . . .

How can the foot or hand benefit the whole person if they rebel against the rest of human anatomy?”¹

Basically, the message in most of the political rhetoric was:

*You’re a part of the body, like it or not,
and you don’t help the body by complaining
or trying to change the way things are.
So just be quiet and do your job!*

Paul’s use of the metaphor is quite different.

He was writing, of course, to the church in Corinth—

“the biggest city in Greece, enormously wealthy, and bustling with a mix of people from all over the Mediterranean world.”²

This all led to some high level diversity in the church.

Remember that the early church had no public meeting houses,

no church buildings of their own,

so churches assembled in people’s homes, household churches.

Households then, of course, were not like what we think of today.

Households at the time might include the extended family, their slaves & servants, and workers from the family business (which was run out of the house).

Plus, if they lived on a busy street, they might rent out the part by the street to shopkeepers, so the renters and even their customers and associates might be considered part of the household.

¹ Johnson, Earl S. Jr. *Lectionary Homiletics*: January 2004 Issue.

² Cawley, Janet. *Who Is Our Church?* Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2006. Page 43.

“What bound this diverse group together was the relationship of dependence on the head of the household for protection and patronage.”³

This was no egalitarian organization, no democracy.
The lines of authority were clearly defined.

Everyone’s wellbeing depended on the head of the household,
so he was the one with all the power.

All of these dynamics might be at play in the early church.

Then Paul had to go and do something crazy.

“Paul pushed for a radical equality in the life of the church—
saying that there was neither slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, male nor female,
for we are all one in Christ.

However, household churches evidently found it difficult to let go
of such basic social distinctions.

How was the slave-owner supposed to respond to the
“In Christ there is no slave nor free” theology?

How was the head of the household supposed to get any work done
if he didn’t rule over his servants and employees?

And then Paul went and talked about everyone having spiritual gifts.

How could the head of the household acknowledge that one of his slaves
had been given the gift of leadership,
while his only gift was to provide the space and pay the bills?”⁴
You can imagine how well that would go over
with the one used to being in charge!

So when Paul tells them that together, they are the body of Christ,
he is saying that nobody is more important than anybody else,
and that was shocking.

All parts of the body are important,
even those parts that seem less important.

Take the big toe, for example.

Not an important part of the body, we might think . . .
until we stub that big toe in the middle of the night
and it becomes the center of our universe.

So I wonder . . . what part of the body are you?

If the church is the body of Christ, and we are all members of it,

³ Ibid., p. 45.

⁴ Ibid., p. 46.

what body part are you?
 I won't be able to see a show of hands, but you can see each other,
 so I'll ask you to raise your hand if you thought "hands" or "feet."
 It's a typical response, an easy response, but also a very UCC response.
 As a denomination, we are a "hands and feet" kind of group.
 An old UCC slogan says "To believe is to care; to care is to do."
 We do with our hands and feet.
 We deliver meals for Meals on Wheels.
 We write letters to our legislators through Isaiah.
 We walk in the gay pride parade.
 There's nothing wrong with being hands and feet.
 We need hands and feet. We need lots of hands and feet.
 And we need other parts, too.

Brian Volck, a pediatrician and writer with a deep interest in theology,
 tells this story in an article about our passage for today.
 "Last year, while visiting our dear friends Sandie and Owen
 and enjoying an evening of good food and even better conversation,
 Jill, my wife, said, only half in jest,
 'When I look at what other people accomplish, I can't help thinking about
 all those other things I should be doing:
 working to stop the death penalty, saving starving children,
 reading the best books, having informed opinions.'
 Sandie paused a moment to ponder Jill's concerns, and said,
 'All those things are important, but we're all part of the body of Christ,
 and we have a role, however small.
 So what if you're the nose hair? You're there for a purpose.
 You may not have any idea what good you're doing, but that's still your job:
 to be a nose hair in the body of Christ.'⁵
 Raise your hand if you thought of yourself as a nose hair in the body of Christ!

You have probably heard of Sister Simone Campbell.
 She was one of the organizers and faces of the Nuns on the Bus tours.
 As the Executive Director of NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice,
 she traveled extensively, advocating for systemic change in public policy.
 "In Washington she lobbies on issues that help 'mend the gaps'
 in income and wealth in the U.S., focused specifically on

⁵ Volck, Brian. "A Nose Hair in the Body of Christ." <https://ekkleziaproject.org/blog/2013/01/a-nose-hair-in-the-body-of-christ/>

how they disproportionately affect people of color and women.
 Around the country she is a noted speaker and educator
 on these public policy issues.”⁶

In writing about all of us as members of the body of Christ, she wrote:
 “Right now in my role at NETWORK,

I’m not feet. I am not hands. I do not do direct service.
 Instead, I think my contribution at this moment is to be stomach acid.
 I help liberate energy. I stir people up.
 I travel the country, meeting people and groups
 and I help break down food (ideas, struggles, frustrations) to liberate energy.
 This gives those who are the hands and feet
 the energy and the ability to do their part.”⁷

So what part of the body of Christ are you?

What is your role?

I know some of you are nerve cells—or more specifically, pain receptors.

You feel the hurting of others,
 and you make sure the body is aware that part of it is in pain.

Some of you are ligaments—

the fibrous connective tissue which attaches bone to bone,
 and serves to hold structures together and keep them stable.

Some of you are optic nerves.

You see the world around us very clearly,
 and you send messages to the brain so that we all can see.

Some of you are arteries,

moving from the heart to empower the body.

You may be collagen, which connects and heals,

or muscle, which turns energy into action.

“Are you the heart, praying for change?

Are you the mouth, speaking truth to power?

Are you the ears, listening to the experience of others?”⁸

You are all needed and valued in the body of Christ.

The church in Corinth was having trouble learning this.

They had lots of other trouble, too.

⁶ <https://networklobby.org/about/srsimonebio/>

⁷ <https://networklobby.org/20202304justice/>

⁸ *ibid.*

There was division, jealousy, and quarreling among them.
 They boasted about their spiritual gifts.
 They were arrogant about their knowledge.
 Wealthier members humiliated the poor at the table of communion.
 Some were guilty of immorality and the others tolerated it.
 Some were thoughtless toward others' beliefs and sensitivities.
 They wanted to rank spiritual gifts as more and less important.
 They forgot that what matters most is love.

Perhaps they needed to hear the story "The Rabbi's gift"
 about an old Jewish monastery.

I don't know if the story is factual, but I know that it is true.

At one time the monastery was a thriving institution with many members,
 but it had declined and it was clearly dying.

Four elderly monks and their elderly abbot were the only ones left.

They were depressed and angry and they snapped at each other,
 and they were ashamed of what they had become.

The abbot went to visit an old rabbi and asked him for advice.

The rabbi said he didn't know how he could help;
 the only thing he did know is this:

"One of you is the Messiah."

The abbot returned to the monastery and told the others of this peculiar statement.

None of them could figure it out—the old rabbi must be crazy!

When they considered their pathetic little remnant community,
 they were certain that none of them could possibly be the Messiah.

But still, the thought took hold of them.

What if the old rabbi knows something we don't?

They began to look at each other with curiosity, then with affection;
 affection became respect and respect eventually became love.

They began to treat each other as if the other was indeed the Messiah.

Visitors noticed the serenity that enfolded this tiny community,
 and the news spread,

and people began to visit the monastery just to experience this holy love.

Soon, some decided to join the community,

and gradually the monastery was restored to vibrant life . . .

all because they began to look at each other as if the other might be the Messiah.⁹

It's amazing what happens when we change our perspective.

⁹ Cawley, Janet. *Who Is Our Church?* Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2006. Page 56.

So it is when we see our church as the body of Christ.
When we look at each other as an important part of the body,
we see one another differently.
Nobody is expendable. Nobody's views are irrelevant.

The church in Corinth needed to hear that lesson.
And yet, to them—this group of arrogant, insensitive, immoral people—
Paul said, “You are the body of Christ.”
Not “You can be the body of Christ if you just shape up.”
Not “You could be the body of Christ if you got your act together.”
Not even “You will be the body of Christ if you stop being arrogant jerks.”
No, Paul says, “You are the body of Christ.”

Our goal as a church then is to operate so that people don't say,
“THAT'S the body of Christ??”
but so that they affirm, “Now THAT's the body of Christ!”

We do need lots of hands and feet.
There is much to be done in the world around us.
I could even argue that most of us need to put our hands and feet to work.
But if we know our core place in the body—
if we know that our role is connection or energy or heart or stomach acid,
then the work of our hands and feet will be a natural result
of our place in the body.
Who are you called to be?