

“Body Language”
I Corinthians 12: 12-31a
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Unlike the Biblical book Donald Trump made famous a couple of weeks ago, you know Two Corinthians, the passage I just read today comes from a book we call First Corinthians, or Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church. In truth, we don’t really know if it’s Paul’s first letter to this particular congregation, but it appears to be one of several letters he wrote to the church in Corinth, some of which were saved by the early Christians and put together in two books or epistles that were circulated among the churches in the Mediterranean in the first and second centuries. Remember that Paul was above all a missionary and he was all about planting new churches around the northern rim of the Mediterranean Sea, in places we call Turkey, Greece and Italy today. He never stayed in any one place for long, maybe 18 months or so. And after he left a church people still looked to him for advice on theological and practical issues in church life. And since they didn’t have phones or email or even telegrams, they wrote letters back and forth.

The church at Corinth seemed to demand a lot of attention from Paul and it becomes clear when you read his letters to them that they were a congregation with lots of turmoil and factions in the church. Perhaps this should have been expected given their location.

Corinth was an important city in Greece situated on an isthmus between two ports that guaranteed that it was filled with sailors, travelers, traders and other entrepreneurs. It was a city that prided itself with being a “haven for the newly rich,” open to new ideas and tolerant of diversity. By the time Paul started a church there, its occupants had come to be known for their lavish lifestyles and conspicuous consumption, famous for its theaters, temples, casinos and brothels. Maybe this is unfair to say, but it sounds a lot like the NYC that Ted Cruz talks about.

And, so no big surprise, the church at Corinth was much like the city itself: ethnically, economically and socially diverse with people of all sorts of backgrounds and culture. They were upper class and lower class, religious and not religious, enslaved and free, Greek and foreigners. And as much as we all like diversity, it’s not always comfortable, especially trying to figure out whose unspoken rules you’re supposed to follow about etiquette, dress codes, food, and appropriate worship styles. People from different cultural backgrounds and customs tend to see things quite differently and often that can lead to significant conflict, especially if you have to figure out who’s right. As you read through I Corinthians you’ll see that they had disputes about everything from food sacrificed to idols to whether it was okay to have sex with prostitutes or one’s own stepmother, or if you should abstain from sex altogether. (And you thought those first Christians were only interested in spiritual things, didn’t you?) Actually Paul saw all these things as spiritual matters because he understood our bodies to be temples of the Spirit. But that’s not the part of his letter that we’re looking at today.

Chapter 12 comes in a section in which Paul addresses questions about worship. At issue in this chapter were folks who were praying in tongues, that is in a language that is not understood by

human beings (unless you have the gift of interpreting tongues) but apparently that God and the angels understand. If you've ever heard someone speaking or praying in tongues, it's quite amazing and jaw-dropping. So those with that particular gift thought they were "all that," and everyone was trying to figure out how to get that gift. Kind of like getting the latest iPhone or Fitbit. Paul is not impressed.

Paul is actually extremely upset with all the factions and arguments that are dividing the church, which he, like the UCC, thinks should be unified, "that all may be one." And so Paul offers an analogy that has become one of the most celebrated metaphors in the Christian church. He compares the church to the human body which has many parts but is one organic entity. This metaphor wasn't original to Paul. Classical literature is filled with such analogies of how a community is connected and works together for a common goal. But Paul gave it an innovative twist. Generally the metaphor was used to reinforce a hierarchical understanding of a political, business or military organization. Those at the bottom of the ladder should stay put and be grateful for the guidance and protection of their natural superiors. After all, in the human body, the brain makes all the crucial decisions and seen as more important than the hands and feet that do the work or the organs that sustain the routine functioning of the body. We see that kind of hierarchy all the time in our own lives and society. In the military we have the Commander-in-Chief and the Joint Chiefs in Staff...and then we have the "grunts" and the "drones" who carry out commands. We have Chief Executive Officers and Chief Financial Officers in business, and all the "worker bees" who do the actual day-to-day work. And we assume (and develop pay structures based on the assumption) that the CEO and the General and Superintendent of Schools are more valuable than the sergeant or the machinist or the classroom teacher and are paid and given respect accordingly.

Paul doesn't see church life that way at all. He says that we are the Body of Christ, with Jesus as the head...and everyone else has a critical part in the functioning of the whole body. He doesn't argue for any kind of hierarchy or subordination but instead talks about the absolute need for diversity and interdependence and honoring of each part. If we're all eyes, then how would the body move around? How would it fix dinner to keep the body going? How would it hear what's happening in the world? We can't all be the decision makers or the bread bakers or the bell ringers or the crisis visitors. Thank God for diversity. Thank God that each of us is gifted in some way that can contribute to the good of the whole community. Thank God that you have gifts that I don't have and I have gifts you don't have so that we can live and work together to fulfill the functions of the Body.

This morning we are recognizing, affirming, blessing the ministry of a few people who have been elected by this congregation and who are willing to use their particular gifts in service to this congregation. They serve on the Governing Board and as such they set goals, make policy decisions, oversee the finances, property and staff. Thank God there are people who want to do all that! But their gifts and their service are not more important than that of the Deacons or the Choir or the Earth Team or the Youth Group or the Refugee Resettlement Team. The work the Board does makes it possible for all of the rest of us to do our work better, to exercise our gifts, to fulfill the mission of this church.

It's a funny thing about participation and leadership in churches. Usually it takes someone else to notice your gifts, to ask you to serve, to say we need you to do this...please. But in this congregation what we hope is that you will recognize your own gifts and follow your passions and ask how you can put them to work. That can be hard, so we also hope that when you see someone else with particular gifts or talents, you'll talk to them about that and ask if there are ways you could help them use them for the ministry of the church. That's how we get new initiatives started and sustain the ministries we have. Sometime in the next few months Yolanda will hold a workshop on Identifying Spiritual gifts, to help us claim and activate our gifts and talents. We need each other. We need each other's gifts. We cannot move forward without all the varieties of gifts and parts of the body working together.

When Paul wrote about being the body of Christ I don't think he was just talking about one congregation, one particular church in Corinth. In fact he used the metaphor in his letters to other churches. I think he meant that ALL Christians in all churches make up the Body of Christ. And, again even though we strive for unity, we also recognize the critical importance of diversity. Not all churches are like this congregation. There is something unique and wonderful about this church. In the months ahead we will be thinking and talking about that. What are the particular gifts, strengths, passions and talents that this congregation brings to the whole Body of Christ? What is our particular strength and gift that we contribute to the well-being of the whole Body of Christ, to the well-being of the people of Asheville, to the healing, reconciliation, wholeness—the Shalom--of the world?

I know you are an activist church. You want to be out there serving breakfast in Pritchard Park, marching in rallies in Raleigh, hosting Room in the Inn for homeless women, helping refugees resettle. And I hope you will continue to do all those things and more in the weeks and months ahead. But I also hope you will take some time to participate in some times of reflection, discernment, even introspection as we look at these critical questions of who we are and who God is calling us to be, as we take stock of our gifts and talents and identify our place in the Body of Christ.

Because the Body needs each of us—and all of us--to function at its best.