

Sermon by Audrey Klein-Leach, Third Sunday after Epiphany, Year C

Let the words of my mouth and meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

So I have a funny story to share about this sermon. I originally drafted it a couple of weeks ago and read it to my husband to get his feedback as I always do. And, as he always does, he provided me with some constructive feedback and suggested I reorder parts of it. When I went to bed that night, I inadvertently left the sermon on the coffee table. The following morning my husband asked me to come downstairs to the living room to “see something”. Well, our dog Cadie, had clearly listened to my husband’s constructive feedback and took his reordering instructions quite literally – she had SHREDDED IT! There was my sermon strewn across the floor. So with some very clear feedback from my family, I started from scratch; hopefully this effort is better...

The passage we heard from Corinthians today holds a lot of memories for me. As an adolescent I was the member of YPF (Young People’s Fellowship) at my parish in Stratford, Connecticut. Stratford, Connecticut is a town on Long Island Sound in Fairfield County that was also home to Sikorsky Aircraft and Raytheon’s brake division. I say all that because we were a motley crew. About ½ boys, ½ girls from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds ranging from families who struggled to make ends meet to some of the best-heeled in town. As with any group of adolescents, we struggled to understand ourselves, our families, the world in which we found ourselves, as our bodies morphed seemingly in front of our own eyes. The short became tall. Braces on teeth transformed the awkward, bucked

teeth individual into someone totally different. We even had a set of identical twins in the group.

One Sunday the Curate decided we needed to work on our Christian formation - not just our volleyball skills. So he sat us in a circle and read us the passage from Corinthians we just heard. He then went around the circle and assigned each of us a body part we had to portray and told us that we had to arrange ourselves into a "body". Much laughter and conversation ensued - how can someone 6'2" be an eye? - , as we twisted, turned and tried again. It really was the Christian version of the game Twister. But in the end, we settled down, we listened to one another and actually made it happen. In the process, we got insight into working together, listening, taking turns being the leader as well as being a follower and in the end experienced finally being a whole. When we debriefed about the experience, every single one of us commented on how we were each an important part, but that none of it really made sense until we joined together – and became a body. As they say "the whole is more than a sum of its parts". It served as a powerful lesson that clearly has stayed with me all these years.

Last week John Nieman talked about how for the author of the Gospel of John Christ is the revealer of God; the true light that enables us to see God. Here in Chapter 12 of 1st Corinthians, Paul uses the imagery of the body – many parts working as one – using their various gifts received from the Spirit - for the common good. Through the simile of the body, Paul describes the need for *all* gifts, from *all* members of the community for it to function and thrive.

And what happens when we don't work together? Walls and temples are destroyed – both literally and figuratively. When Nehemiah learns that the city of Jerusalem is in ruins and without a wall to defend against its enemies, he asks the King of Persia if he can go and try to do something. The King grants his wish and sends him as governor of Judah. Despite many obstacles, people finally join together and the wall gets repaired in 56 days. Nehemiah restores just leadership in the Temple and encourages all to have a living relationship with God through prayer. In today's passage, all the people of Israel are gathered together to hear the word of God. In their shared participation, Nehemiah and Ezra exhort them to appreciate God as a source of strength in their lives and also admonish them to share with "those for whom nothing is prepared..."

Similarly, the author of Luke/Acts is writing his narrative immediately following the fall of Jerusalem. Like Nehemiah, the fall of Jerusalem, informs the author of Luke/Acts' view of the destruction of the Temple. In the Gospel of Luke, the focus is on Jesus as the savior of *all*.

What all three passages we've read today emphasizes is, that as individual as we are, we also are part of a greater continuum. None of us are alike. Even those identical twins in my youth group were quite distinct. And yet for Paul, that is exactly the point. It is in the separate parts coming together where the walls, temples and *communities* are built, rebuilt and sustained.

Another way to look at it is whereas for the author the Gospel of John, Jesus is the true light; for Paul, Christ is truly incarnate – a body that walked, talked, died on

Calvary who operated under human conditions. As such, Paul challenges us to see ourselves as the embodiment of Christ not primarily as individuals, but instead as belonging to a larger whole. To Paul, to be the Body of Christ is a way of being; it is a shared identity between Christ and each believer who is imbued with a special function whether it be apostle, prophet or teacher and each with special gifts, which were enumerated in last week's passage.

What Paul is calling for is unity, not unwavering uniformity – *along with a responsibility for mutual care*. To him, that is what it means to be the Body of Christ. We are individual parts searching for commonality. Each week, when the Eucharist is celebrated, this is actualized, as we bring our gifts (tangible and spiritual) to the altar table where they are collected and then, shared with - and distributed among - the entire community through the sharing of bread and cup.

From creation through to this day, we humans have a need for each other emotionally, intellectually and physically. When we become isolated and disconnected we lose our way emotionally, intellectually and it does have a negative effect on us physically as well. As C.S. Lewis said in *The Four Loves*, "...our whole being by its very nature is one vast need; incomplete, preparatory, empty yet cluttered, crying out for Him who can untie things that are now knotted together and tie up things that are still dangling loose. ...

As Christians we are called to join together in a constant dialogue with each other – or using my example from youth group – in a constant game of twister – and with God on what it means to be the 'body of Christ'.

So what does all this mean to you and me in January 2022 here in Belfast, Maine? We are at an important point in the life of St. Margaret's. In a few months we will welcome our new priest, Barbara Briggs, to become part of "our body". The body that is St. Margaret's. Speaking for myself as your new Senior Warden, I stand before you this morning feeling much as I did that Sunday afternoon many decades ago. A bit unsure of myself, where I might fit, how this is all going to work out. And yet, just as was the case back then, I am very aware that I am not alone. I am just one part of the body – one small part – and I am inviting *all of you* to join with me in the Christian game of Twister as we figure out and shape the present and future together – with the helping hand of the Holy Spirit.

You each bring a unique gift to this place, to this time - ***all*** are needed. The truth of the Gospel and what Paul points out is that we find the fullest expression of who we are when we work together to find ourselves – and most importantly God – through community.

Christ who was fully human; fully God - Help us to Look. Listen. Attend. To ourselves, to each other and you. Amen.