
BODY PARTS
I CORINTHIANS 12:12-21
A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 23, 2022
BY THE REV. DR. CAROL GREGG

Prayer.

I like thumbs. It is a useful little digit. You can give a “thumbs up” sign on Zoom to cast a vote or affirm a speaker. With the slightest movement you can turn the page of an e-book on your phone. And, of course, because it is opposable, we can successfully lift a coffee mug to our mouth without drenching our lap with a hot beverage. Very handy.

Another useful body part is the hyoid bone. (It is amazing what comes up when you google “unusual body parts”.) The hyoid bone is a small solitary U-shaped bone, located in the neck. It has a role in all activities of the mouth including tongue movement, chewing, swallowing, and speaking.¹ While they may not have known about it, members of the ancient Corinthian church appreciated this little bone.

Our scripture reading for today from First Corinthians is a continuation of the passage Dean Powery addressed last week. In last week’s reading, the author, the Apostle Paul, wrote about the varieties of spiritual gifts. Dean Powery highlighted the need for all gifts to be used for the common good. Today’s section of this passage offers the metaphor of the body to describe the church. Paul’s writing is clear, encouraging us to appreciate the diversity and interconnection of all parts of the body.² This section in the letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, is part of a larger whole, all of which is addressing the gift of speaking in tongues. The section is three chapters: 12, 13 and 14. Some members of the church held that speaking in tongues, was of more value than other gifts, thus rendering the recipient of the gift more important than other members of the community. It took Paul three chapters to address this issue in the church, dismantling the notion that any gift took precedence over another. The hyoid bone, like the gift of speaking in tongues, cannot claim superiority.

When Paul used the metaphor of a human body to describe those who gathered to worship Jesus he was using a technique familiar to his day. It was common in the ancient world for speech makers to compare society to a body with a variety of parts or functions. Typically, the purpose was to encourage stability and the maintenance of the status quo. For instance, according to *The History of Rome*, around 490 BC, there was a great panic in Rome in which the plebeians and Senators feared each other due to a variety of secret gatherings and conspiracies. The rulers planned to send in Agrippa Menenius to speak to the plebeians. He is described as an “eloquent man and dear to the plebeians as being one of themselves by birth.” He spoke of a body, in which the members each had their own ideas and voice. Some parts of the body thought it was unfair that hands and backs should provide labor for food, while the belly simply enjoyed the good things given to it. The angry parts then decided not to feed the belly, which was clearly detrimental to the whole body. The history states, “Drawing a parallel from this to show how like was the internal dissension of the bodily members to the anger of the plebs against the Fathers, he prevailed upon the minds of his hearers.”³ In Rome, the metaphor was used to keep the lower class subservient while maintaining the privileges of the upper class. It was a common rhetorical device to maintain a static social order. Do your job. Stay in your place. Don’t complain.

¹ Ghadeer AlJomaih and Ritech Menezes, “[Anatomy, Head and Neck, Hyoid Bone](#),” August 21, 2021, published by National Center for Biotechnology Information

² Richard Hays, *First Corinthians*, p. 187

³ Titus Livius (Livy), [The History of Rome, Book 2](#) Benjamin Oliver Foster, Ph.D., Ed.. 2:32

Paul's agenda with the Corinthians was dramatically different. He took a familiar metaphor and flipped it upside down. Instead of using the image of the body to maintain hierarchies he used it to affirm the value of all parts of the body. The diverse parts are needed and interconnected. We need the big toe, or some would say the "great toe", for balance and walking. We need our spinal cords to carry nerve signals.

It is a powerful affirmation that "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." (I Cor 12:12) Each part, seen and unseen, known and unknown, are integral to the whole. All valued. All Affirmed. This is an important way to hear this passage. One is not better than the other.

I think there is an additional way to hear this passage, and that is a call to participate. Imagine one part of the body deciding to take a break. What if your favorite basketball player decided he would rest his left foot during the game? He could hop down the court, probably faster than any of us, but would be no match for his opponents and little help for his teammates. And what if kayaker or someone who uses a wheelchair decides to use only one arm for a time? In short order, she would find herself going in circles. For the body to function well, individual parts don't have the option to independently take a time out. The claim that all parts are needed is both affirmation and call.

I encourage those who are part of the body of Christ to exercise their muscles in three ways.

First, is regular worship attendance. Being here is part of being the body. I understand that many of us are not able to be physically in this room on Sunday mornings at 11:00 a.m. as some of you live out of town, some are physically unable to attend, others are staying off icy roads, and many are wisely avoiding a virus. I understand. For those of you who need to worship online, you can still do so regularly and, as you do, I encourage you to connect with others even from your own home. Put a message of peace in the YouTube chat or text a friend a greeting about the service. When our services were entirely virtual, many of you sent messages of encouragement to the worship leaders, reminding us that in fact you are out there listening. Those messages were a gift that filled the empty sanctuary.

For those of you who are not restricted by health or geography, and are already out traveling, working, or socializing, I encourage you to resist the temptation of convenience to simply watch the service at home. A year or so ago, I saw a cartoon of a woman in a bathrobe, with curlers in her hair and fuzzy slippers on her feet. She was depicted walking down the center aisle of a church. The caption was along the lines of "Mrs. Smith is accustomed to worshipping at home." Whether you wear your fuzzy slippers or your fancy shoes is less important than being here. When we are physically together, we feel the organ music, we join our voices with other worshipers, we speak a welcoming word to one another, and we practice loving one another. COVID won't last forever and our faith is incarnational, so if, when, the time is right I encourage you to worship in person.

Second is giving financially. Financial contributions are a way of investing in the body of Christ, deepening our commitment and connection. Jesus taught that where our treasure is, our hearts will be also. (Matt 6:21) so how we contribute financially is spiritually important for each of us. Financial gifts, no matter the size, are an important contribution to the whole. Together, we build the ministries of this place.

Worship regularly. Give financially. These practices strengthen both the individual and the whole. Third, to do one more thing. There are plenty of options from which to choose, including those which are yet to be discovered. It has to be right for the you, consistent with your spiritual gifts and the season of life in which you find yourself. For some, it is a Sunday morning responsibility such as ushering, singing, or reading scripture. For some, this may be writing cards to those who are ill or bringing a meal to a new parent. For some, it is serving on a committee or board, many of which are remaining virtual. For some, it is teaching or learning. For some, it is attending a small group or fellowship event. Participation in the body of Christ comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes, and is open to all – students, faculty and staff, community members, young and old.

In the spiritual practice of doing one more thing, consider the significance of showing up. In a small group discussion, a friend of mine commented that he felt he had the gift of “showing up”. It was not uncommon for him to drive out-of-state to attend the funeral of a friend’s mother; likewise, he made time to attend the special events of those he knew. Showing up can be a gift. Joining Chapel Scholars, attending a Bible study, or small group is a gift to the other attendees. Sometimes we are tempted to think only what we will get out of an event, rather than what we might give to it by participating. If you are present, God might just use you to offer a good word to someone else.

The body needs the participation of all its members. Please know that as I say this it is not an encouragement to over-function or do so much you are worn out. We know from bodily injuries, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, that too much can cause damage. It is important to participate in a way that fits you.

If you are not yet connected to this portion of the body of Christ, I invite you to use the QR code on the back of the bulletin later today to fill out a short form. If there is a way you would like to participate in the ministries here, please name it. If you are not sure, just write a short note to say you want a Sunday morning job or a from-home commitment, or a way to meet other students and we will follow up with you.

Before you do this, I also want to be clear about why we participate in the church. We are not simply a voluntary organization like many others that need people to fill roles. We are something different.

In the beginning of our reading today, Paul wrote “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with ...” right here we would expect Paul to say the “church”. Instead, he says “Christ.” (I Cor 12:12) We are not simply members of a religious organization called the church, we are part of Christ himself. We are Christ’s body on earth. We are joined to the Holy One to bring light to the world. We are gifted and blessed by the Spirit for the common good. We are united and fed at this table. We are connected to one another as well as to all Christians, in all churches, worldwide.

Friends, we are the body of Christ and individually members of it. This is a holy thing. An affirmation and a calling.

Thanks be to God. Amen.