
The Body of the Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 27, 2013 by the Rev. Dr. Luke Powery

When I was in high school, in Miami, FL, my neighborhood friends and I would play street football as much as possible throughout the week and on weekends. We dreamed dreams and had visions of scoring game-winning touchdowns to win the Super Bowl (this was my life before I got real serious and went to seminary). One particular afternoon my neighborhood team was challenged by another team from a near by neighborhood. We always liked a challenge. We decided to play that game on their home turf. In hindsight, that might have been where the trouble began. We showed up at their home field and began to play a passionate game of tackle football as only teenagers could, showing our swag with our fancy football moves. As the game transpired, it seemed as if this football game was soon becoming a spin-off of the World Wrestling Entertainment/WWE. Some of the other team's players began to become really unchristian and take cheap shots as they tackled and attempted clothes lines as long passes/"bombs" were being thrown in this so-called "game." As the game grew more serious and intense and it was becoming evident that we were going to win (of course), I remember one of my friends saying to me, "I got your back." "I got your back" were words that were supposed to mean that he was watching out for me. Well, when the game ended and we clearly won, after we gave congratulatory high fives to each other, did our victory dance, and began to walk away, let's just say WWE continued because as we were leaving, I and another friend were chosen to physically receive the frustration of the losing team with the laying on of hands while my friend who said "I got your back" took off like a thief in the night running through the school that was near by. He didn't have my back but I saw his back as he ran away. We need you! We were hoping that he had the spiritual gift of karate and could use his hands and bless the other team (I forgot I'm in church!). We realized that we needed him and didn't say to each other like many in the church at Corinth said, "we don't need you" or as the scripture says, "I have no need of you."

You see the Corinthian church was, as some say, 'one hot mess.' They made the Kardashian family look good. Pastoral counseling and conflict mediation sessions did not work. When they came together, things fell apart. They were the humpty dumpty church—they fell and no one could put them back together again. So many factions and divisions and cliques. No coffee hour after church. No potluck dinners. No genuine communion. No sense of the common good. This was because many assumed that the body did not matter. They believed that if they were gifted with the angelic gift of tongues that they had reached the height of Christian spirituality and nothing else mattered including how they treated one another. Bodily ethics in the community was deemed not as spiritual as the gift of tongues. They were so spiritual, which was the main debate in that church (what it meant to be spiritual), that they neglected the physical.

But what they didn't realize was that the spiritual includes the physical. They were so beat up from the feet up that they didn't realize they had feet, had a body. They didn't realize that the Church was a body, the body of the Spirit. This is not surprising with the Neoplatonic hierarchical goal of reaching the state of the immortal soul while escaping the body—the false notion that to be really spiritual means to ignore the material realm, when in fact pneumatology, the work of the Spirit, implies materiality and physicality. Life in the Spirit plunges us into embodiment and life in the world and does not teach us to escape the world. At the baptism of Jesus, the Spirit descends in "bodily form" like a dove. And the Spirit is the agent of the Incarnation, when the Word became flesh. When God performed his salvation symphony for the world, God took on the physical form of a human body. We don't worship a Jesus who came with a virtual body in the world of Second Life; he had a real one.

The Spirit has a body and what a sight it is. When Paul uses the language of "body" as a metaphor he's following in the steps of the ancient Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition. To speak of the 'body' in this way is to speak of unity. The image is used to combat factionalism and promote belonging, harmony, interdependence, and unity within diversity. It's a way of urging order in the midst of chaos. To be a spiritual community, they have to be a body. There is only "one body." And the "one Spirit" incorporates us into the body. Over and over

again, Paul stresses unity and oneness. Again and again you can hear him say ‘same, same, same’ ‘one, one, one,’ ‘body, body, body.’ OK, we get the point Paul.

Yet the body has many members with a variety of gifts from the same Spirit. “Out of many, one.” One body with many body parts. Eyes and ears and mouth and nose, head and shoulders knees and toes knees and toes. There’s a big foot in the body. Someone’s a hand or an arm. Someone maybe an eyelash or even a toenail (now don’t go looking around to see who looks like a nail). All of these parts form a body and without any of them, there is no body. But there is one body made up of diverse parts that work together.

My father would tell me with his preacherly voice—“don’t hunch your shoulders, boy. Stand up straight.” He knew that hunched shoulders may affect my back and if my back is achy that may affect my leg and if my leg is disturbed that could affect my foot. He knew that

the toe bone connected to the foot bone

the foot bone connected to the ankle bone

the ankle bone connected to the leg bone

the leg bone connected to the knee bone

the knee bone connected to the thigh bone

the thigh bone connected to the hip bone

the hip bone connected to the back bone

the back bone connected to the shoulder bone

the shoulder bone connected to the neck bone

the neck bone connected to the head bone

That if one suffers, all suffer. If one is honored, all rejoice. What affects one part of the body, affects the whole because we are an interconnected web of mutuality and empathy. All are connected not over Facebook but in the Spirit. The Christian life is not meant to be lived in isolation from one another.

But we come together as a body made up of different parts. Diversity does not destroy the body. It is what makes the body beautiful. “If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?” “Each is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”(12:7). Everyone plays a part. Everyone is a part of the body. Everyone can’t do ministry like Christy Lohr Sapp, Meghan Feldmeyer, Adam Hollowell, Bruce Puckett, Kennetra Irby, and Gerly Ace. Everyone can’t play music like Rodney Wynkoop, Bob Parkins, David Arcus, Brian Schmidt, John Santoianni, Sam Hammond, and Mike Lyle. Everyone can’t administrate like Beth Gettys Sturkey, Adrienne Koch, Sara Blaine, Kelsey Hallatt, Lisa Moore, Lucy Peaden, Oscar Dantzler, and Razz Za Rayakob.

But everyone is a body part and we need every part. Small eyes. Long arms. Strong hands. Little feet. Pointy ears. Flat nose. Big mouth (yes we need those too!). Parts you may have never considered to be important. Fingernails. Knee caps. Ankles. Parts you may overlook or not see often because they sit behind you. Though I’m not a turn-to-your-neighbor kind of preacher, I’m going to invite you to use your body and turn around and look all the way to the back rows of the chapel (hello, back there!). The back row is a part of the body. I see eyes and feet and hands and ears and arms. Don’t try to figure out who looks like a thumb. But behold your body parts.

We’re a motley crew for Christ. White, black, young, eternally young, those with hair, those without hair, lawyers, doctors, psychologists, doctors, scientists, doctors, Episcopalians, Baptists, Methodists (I can’t forget them!), Duke fans and undercover fans for that team with light blue blood. Diverse parts of a unified body. We are of the same body, such a unique body that Will Willimon and I are brothers (I knew we always resembled

each other!). We all need each other for the body to be one. I cannot be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.

Be the body part you are called to be. You are a gift to the community. There is no insignificant part. No matter how small or big you think your role or gifts are. For the body to be one, every part has to do its part, even if someone does something in a different way than we would do it. We are a unified body, not an uniform one. That means we will not always agree but we will always need each other with our different gifts and different body parts. That way we get a glimpse of the breadth and beauty of God. A body is not one part but every part put together.

So what part will you play at Duke Chapel? We have need of you. You are needed. You don't have to look a certain way or serve a certain function to be accepted or valued. Body image is still an issue for many in society—what counts as beauty or masculinity. When I was 4 or 5 years old, in many of my picture poses I'm without a shirt showing my manly muscles (don't worry I don't do this anymore). Back then, I wanted to be Popeye the Sailor Man or Superman, faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. I'm still trying to convince my wife Gail that I'm not Superman! She just won't believe me.

Everyone can't be a Superman yet we're a part of the same body. If you're an eye, God can use you to help see the way forward in the future. If you're a hand, God can use you to build new systems and structures for a just society. If you're an ear, God can use you to listen to those who are usually ignored. If you're an arm, God can use you to hug someone who needs love today. Every single body part matters to the body and matters to God. Your contribution, your gift, your part is vital to the life of the body, the body of the Spirit.

Or to use Paul's words, "you are the body of Christ." And what a body. A spiritual body revealed through the material means of bread and wine. You can touch, taste, smell, and feed on this body. You can hear the head of this body say, "This is my body broken for you." Every piece of bread is a member of the one body. We have need of Christ's body that in receiving his broken holiness we may be made a whole and holy body with eyes, ears, mouth, nose, head and shoulders, knees and toes.