

I

When I was maybe eight or nine years old, I broke my little toe. What I remember most about the experience was that the pain wasn't just contained to my foot. It seemed to radiate up my leg, up my spine, up to the very top of my head. Of the hundreds of bones in my body, I had broken one of the smallest ones, but for days, it affected my entire body.

II

We've all had that kind of experience, haven't we? The smallest little thing like a hangnail or a blister or even a mosquito bite can affect us in powerful ways. And perhaps that's why the Apostle Paul finds the interconnected human body to be such an apt metaphor for what it means to live together as disciples of Jesus Christ.

III

If you've been worshiping with us this spring, you know that we've been working for several Sundays in the book of First Corinthians, and of course you know then, that First Corinthians is not a book at all, but a rather long letter, sent from a pastor to a church in the Greek city of Corinth about 20 years or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus. You know that Corinth was a major seaport and center of government and trade, and as such, it was a city of incredible diversity. In fact, the Christians that made up the Corinthian

church may have been the most diverse congregation of the first century.

And all of that diversity of backgrounds and upbringings and worldviews had a profound impact on the church in Corinth. On the one hand, it made for a powerful witness to Jesus Christ - that all of these people from different backgrounds - who wouldn't likely be together in any other setting - were coming together to proclaim that Jesus is Lord of all. But of course, all of that diversity also provided the fertile seedbed for conflict.

And in Corinth, the conflict centered around a number of questions - questions like, "What does it mean to be baptized, and under whose name?" Questions like, "What is the meaning and purpose of spiritual gifts?" And as Whitney reminded us last week, questions like, "What do we really mean when we say that we believe in the resurrection of the dead?"

And so Paul's letters to the Corinthians are the work of a wise pastor trying to address these conflicts that had sprouted up among the followers of Jesus who were trying to figure out how to be the church together in a complex world.

In the passage before us today, Paul uses a metaphor that is relatable and close at hand. He turns to a thing that all people hold in common - our experience of living in a human body.

So listen now for a Word from God from 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.

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. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. 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? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within

the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

On this Day of Pentecost, we remember that about 20 years before Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians, the sum total of Christians in the world was about 120 people, most of them simple folks from a region called Galilee. They were gathered together in Jerusalem, when suddenly, there came from heaven the sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

The crowd there in Jerusalem was astonished, and they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power in our own language?”

Twenty years or so later, Paul writes to the Corinthians, and he argues that diversity is not an impediment to the church’s mission, but rather essential to it, and by God’s own design.

He writes, “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.” And then he goes on to extend the metaphor, painting word pictures of a ridiculous-looking human body made up exclusively of all ears, or all eyes. Paul argues that without diversity and difference, the body would simply cease to be the body, and by the same measure, without diversity and difference, the church would simply cease to be the church. Paul argues that each individual member is an equally valuable and indispensable part of the one body.

And I think, as Americans, we can get on board with that idea. After all, on most of our currency is a Latin phrase – *E pluribus unum* – out of many, one. In our founding document as a nation, we hold these truths as self-evident, that all people were created equal by God and endowed with certain inalienable God-given rights. We can get on board, I think, with the idea that we are one out of many.

But then Paul ups the stakes. He argues that all members are essential, but not all members receive equal treatment. He writes, “On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not

need this.”

IV

I don’t know about you, my friend, but that argument that all members of the body are equal, but not all members are to be treated equally, challenges me. And as I wrestled with the implications of Paul’s argument this week, the Spirit reminded me of some things from my past.

In the spring of 2016, the school board in Fort Worth, Texas, updated some district-wide policy language regarding restroom accommodations for some students. The policy change codified what most campuses had been doing for years – which was allowing students, if they requested, to use a single stall restroom, usually in the office or staff lounge. But what started like an ordinary school board policy update in April took off on social media, and by May, it was national news. Very few people took the time to actually read the policy language or talk to any school faculty and staff. The restrooms in our local public schools had become the latest battleground in the never-ending culture wars. All over town, signs and placards popped up that said, “Protect Our Kids.”

As a parent, as a taxpayer, and as a faith leader, I listened intently to the conversations taking place in the community, and one woman’s comment stands out in my mind to this very day. She said, “As I understand it, we’re talking about a very small number of

kids, maybe 1% of them. I don't understand why we should make 99% of kids feel uncomfortable for just this 1%."

Her argument was grounded in what ethicists call utilitarianism, which says whatever action creates the most good for the most people is the best course of action. The woman's comment got much applause and affirmation from those who were listening, and on an intellectual level, it made sense to me.

But the Spirit nudged me and reminded me of a parable that Jesus tells in the gospel of Luke. Jesus said, a certain shepherd had 100 sheep, but one of them wandered off. ¹

As any business owner or accountant knows, this is what is sometimes referred to as "breakage." In the business world, some products get broken in transit. Some get lost in shipping. Some just seem to disappear into the ether. And so business owners and accountants assume a certain percentage of their products will be lost. It's just one of the costs of doing business.

And so most hearers of this parable about one lost sheep probably assumed that the shepherd understood that a sheep wandering off is unfortunate, but it happens. It's breakage.

But Jesus said, the shepherd left the 99 and went and searched for the

¹ Luke 15:3-7

one until he found it. And when he found the one that had been lost, didn't just go back to work. He called together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost!"

Who does that? What kind of business model is that? What must have the 99 sheep who didn't wander off been thinking about this crazy shepherd?

Now, I don't know about you, my friend, but I have been the one lost lamb a time or two in my life. There are things I've said and things I've not said, things I've done and things I've not done, that I am not proud of, and in all honesty, Jesus should have written me off. I bet if you think about it for a minute, you could probably say the same about yourself.

But here's the thing that amazes me and confounds me about Jesus. He doesn't do write-offs. He doesn't accept loss as just the cost of doing business. For the world 99% is an A+. But Jesus treats 99% as an F. He goes and he searches high and low for the lost one and he won't ever, ever quit. And when the lost have been found again, it's not just back to business. He calls his friends and neighbors and says, "Rejoice with me! For the one that was lost has been found!"

My friend, I don't know a lot, but I know this. When you're lost, when you wander off, Jesus won't ever quit looking for you. Jesus doesn't do write-offs. Jesus doesn't do breakage. You are

precious to him, not because of what you've done or not done or said or not said, but because you belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to him, and he won't ever, ever quit you.

And so as I thought about that woman's argument about the 99% of kids that this doesn't impact, I thought again about Paul's pressing argument to the Corinthians, about how the ones that we think are the weak ones are indispensable, and the ones we think are less honorable we are to clothe with greater honor, and the ones we think are less respectable we are to treat with greater respect, whereas the more respectable members don't need such protection. As I began to think about the upside-down, radical, sometimes completely counterintuitive nature of the gospel we proclaim as Christians.

I thought about that kid sitting all alone in the school lunchroom, pretending not to notice the stares and whispers and giggles. I thought about that kid who walks blocks out of the way on the way to and from school because it reduces the risk of getting jumped. I thought about that kid who dreads gym class with every fiber of their being. I thought about that kid for whom school isn't about homecoming dances and football games and tests and quizzes, but a matter of life and death survival.

I'm sure, my friend, that churches will continue to have conversations about the theology and ethics of the human body. These are not simple conversations, and just because one

church council said one thing one time in one place by no means will settle the matter.

But while we're having those intellectual debates, the reality is that kids who wrestle with identity questions about their human bodies, and then experience rejection by their family and faith communities because they dared to wrestle with those questions are at exponentially higher risk for violence, and they are multiple times more likely to attempt self-harm.

It's been a minute since I was in school, but not so long that I don't remember that to be different makes a kid an easy target. We didn't have public conversations about gender and sexuality in my youth like we are having today, but I heard the whispers and rumors about certain kids.

But I didn't really worry about it too much. It didn't seem to affect me. I was 6'4 by the time I was 14 years old. I was one of the 99 who didn't need extra protection. But I saw those kids. I saw what hell they were going through, just because they were different.

V

I'm mindful that the Apostle Paul wasn't writing his letter to a school board or a city council or a state legislature, but to a church, to the people of God called out by God. Friends, he may not have known it at the time, but through the Holy Spirit, he was writing to *us*.

And so friends, you may have heard that there are some changes coming to the staffing for youth and children's ministry in our church. But some things are not changing. Our church mission remains the same – in response to God's grace, our mission to create community where people – all people, from the youngest to the oldest, seek the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, rejoice in worship, and go forth sharing the love of Christ with the world. That mission has not changed.

Our commitment to children's and youth ministries that are theologically grounded and organized, where children and youth are loved and welcomed for who they are just as they are, has not changed. You'll be hearing more from the session in coming weeks about our plans going forward, and we give thanks that for the past nine years, our church has built a solid foundation for children's and youth ministry and we will continue to build upon it.

But as we think about today, I think about all those signs that popped up all over town that said, "Protect Our Kids." And today, my prayer is yes, protect our kids! Yes, protect them as they grow from infants into children into adolescents into adults. Protect them as they grow in the knowledge and love of God and God's only son Jesus Christ.

Yes, protect Lucy and Jimmy and Celeste and Joanne and Dominik and Alex and Molly and Ruby and Charlie as they continue to live into the promises that were made at their baptisms and as

they make them their own. Protect them as they continue to put childish ways behind them as they become adults. Yes, protect these kids, our kids, most of whom we have known since they were a twinkle in their mother's eye.

But church, if we are serious about being the body of Christ, if we believe Jesus is who he says he is and we are who he says we are, then protect those kids, too. Protect those kids we don't know, because they are all our kids, every last one of them.

male or female, Jew or Greek,
slave or free,

Christian or Muslim,

gay or straight or uncertain,

athlete or musician,

documented or not,

housed or unhoused,

according to the Word of God, every single one of them is our kid, because in the church of Jesus Christ, there's no such thing as "other people's kids."

If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

On this Day of Pentecost, may we go out into the world and act like it. Amen.