

Body Language
Third Sunday After Epiphany
Season of Reconciliation
January 24, 2016
Gordon Wiersma

Text: I Corinthians 12:12-31a

I don't know if you have an impression of the Apostle Paul or not - for the purposes of this sermon it's not required that you DO have an impression – but I know that some of the more experienced biblical students among us have more than impressions but even strong opinions on Paul that range from the appreciative to the...less than appreciative (Paul gets on some people's nerves). I think it's fair to say that the general characterization of Paul goes something like this: heady – wordy – dogmatic – complex – aloof - maybe even obscure and severe. He certainly does like run-on sentences (something I can unfortunately relate too!) – and he can be a bit obnoxious (which I suppose I can relate to also)...but I prefer any comparisons to stop right there!

But it occurred to me that with this passage you could see Paul a bit differently than some of those characterizations – and I say that simply for the reason that Paul is using the image here of the human body as an image for the community of believers - and I think that's a pretty clear, simple, even creative and evocative image to use – one I think connects with most people well. Why, I even think Paul tries to be funny at one point as he is playing with this body image: 'if the whole body were an eye, wouldn't that be silly!' (my translation!) - not a big joke, but still! Sure Paul still gets a bit complicated and wordy at times, but I wanted to give him props for the engaging image – it's basic and earthy and clear - Paul's pretty accessible and relatable – good job, Paul!

And then appreciating that image from Paul, what's interesting is that there's even more to it than meets the eye (pun kind of intended). What a number of commentators point out is that the way Paul uses this image here actually has some radical and provocative implications - because in the social, political, religious climate of that time, the image of the body for a community of people was most often used as a way of putting people in their place – as in: 'the powerful people are at the head of the body, and you lowly people are the feet to support us, and that's the way it should

be and that's the way it's going to stay!' That was said much more eloquently I'm sure by Greek thinkers, but you get the point. So what Paul is doing here is not just using an engaging image – Paul is doing some what I like to call creative subversion: Paul takes this body image expressed in that culture as a means of hierarchy and subordination and uses the image instead as a way to express mutuality and worth for all members of the body. Paul turns upside down the established meaning of subordination and instead offers a picture of the body being about diversity and inter-dependency. As Paul speaks of Jews and Greeks, of free and slaves, all part of the same body AND all mutually valued in and important to it, he is making a radical statement – Paul is describing the body gathered together in Christ as breaking down the world's hierarchies and divisions and building up a whole new organism to be a part of. Well-played creative, radical Paul – well-played.

And I suppose we could just leave it at that – as there remains much for the church to do still to fulfill this image – plenty of hierarchy and division and distinction present to face for us as a congregation and as part of a denomination and as part of the church in the world. But it seems to me that if the Spirit of God led Paul to do some creative subversion in his day, then might not the Spirit be calling us to the same? Paul used the image of the body to undermine a common mentality of the day and remake that image for a body of life-giving relationships in the church. So what I'm wondering is if in our time we need to take that body image and extend it beyond the church – if that is the creative, radical call for us to hear. Because clearly Paul's body image then IS about the church – I believe that is what Paul intends and describes. So I'm not trying to do some complex reasoning (like, maybe, Paul would do!) in order to say Paul isn't really just talking about people in the church; he is – and that is good.

But there are 2 things that I hear in this passage that make me wonder about this body image as a creative, radical image in our time too. The first is this - as Paul plays through this image of the body and the design for diversity within it, one of the questions he poses is this: 'can the eye say to the hand: I have no need of you; or the head to the feet: I have no need of you.' And I found that to be a particularly haunting question – to say "I have no need of you" – to express to

someone that their existence is worthless, useless, unnecessary; for anyone to feel defined by “I have no need of you” strikes me as dehumanizing at its essence. And the second thing that struck me was this; this image is about the church, and it says the church is the body of Christ, but it never says that Christ is the church – right? The church is a body made alive in Christ, but Christ is not contained by that body – no, Christ is the light and life of the world.

And here’s how I think those 2 things come together – that in our time, what the Spirit is speaking to us through this body image is that wherever there are people and places which sound like this: “I have no need of you” – that there the body of Christ is found. What I mean by “I have no need of you” is circumstances in which people’s lives are cut off from meaning and purpose and hope, cut off from agency and from joy. Throughout this Season of Reconciliation we are hearing stories of people caught in human trafficking and of people placed in prison in ways that deny their humanity; we hear in our world people displaced from home but recognized nowhere as belonging – refugees, aliens, illegals; and we know that in our public discourse that those who do not fit the desired template of race or gender or orientation or class or politic or creed are denigrated or dismissed: “I have no need of you.”

Now maybe it already seems very much to you that we are called as the body of Christ to such people and places – Amen! But today what I think is creative and radical through Christ’s Spirit is for us to see the outline of the body of Christ as one that in fact includes all such people and places. I think we are called to break the confines of any image that divides us from others, and instead see in the body an image through which God shows us how to see others: made to share with us the life Christ gives to this world. In Christ we can say to no one: “I have no need of you” – and in that creative subversion, we see ourselves as part of a body of people and creation in which all are loved and needed by God. To which I say, if I may: well-played, creative, radical Holy Spirit, well-played. Amen.