

An Embodied Faith

The Relational Body

We are talking about bodies this month—how different theological images of the body function in our life. Last Sunday, we talked about our individual bodies. They are the breath of life mixed together with the stuff of earth, an indivisible unity of spirit and flesh.

Today, we shift our focus to our bodies in relationship with one another. For our scripture today, we return to Paul. This time, we can rejoice in what Paul wrote. He comes up with a truly extraordinary metaphor for the community: we are individual members who find our identity by belonging to the body. Listen to Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians.

1 Cor 12:12-27

12 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. 13For 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.

14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15If 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. 16And 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. 17If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as [God] chose. 19If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 21The 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.' 22On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23and 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; 24whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

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

I spent the early part of this past week feeling lousy. I watched scenes from a Nashville-area school board's public meetings on their mask policy. Oof. Maybe you saw it. If you didn't, you can guess what happened.

I want you to know, if you don't already, that I am sure that masks work to reduce the spread of airborne viruses. I think that we should employ every technique we can right to slow COVID's spread. At the same time, whenever there are strong opinions on two sides of an issue, we're supposed to listen. I don't know about you, but I am wrong a lot. There's always a portion of the truth I'm missing. Even if you don't end up agreeing, the act of trying to see the world through another person's eyes is an act of empathy. It's good for humanity.

So I listened to what neighbors who were against the masks were saying. A few of them said that masks traumatized their kids. I can see that—nobody I know likes wearing them. A few

folks tried to say that masks don't work—science suggests that a well-made, well-fitting mask does work. But the majority stuck to one basic point: no one—not my neighbors, not school administrators, no elected official, no one—has a right to tell me or my child they must mask. The case against masks was a case for freedom and for personal autonomy. I am my own. No one shall make me do something I don't want to do.

Because we're talking about bodies this month, let me put it in those terms. What I heard the neighbors against mask-wearing saying about their bodies is "my body is mine. No one may interfere with my body, no one has a claim on my body. My body is an island unto itself."

I've been wrestling that affirmation. Is that what our bodies are? Fully autonomous and separate?

Part of me is sympathetic. For years, women have asserted bodily autonomy to claim and defend a right to birth control and abortion. Bodily autonomy is the foundation of consent in the #metoo era. Autonomy is one of the great achievements of the Enlightenment—it affirms the human body is free and self-governing. Autonomy is foundational to democracy—all bodies are equal, and we are to ensure for each the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The philosopher Immanuel Kant said autonomy is the key to becoming a moral being—only when we are autonomous can we rise to the level of a moral being and choose what is good. We Protestants affirm individual autonomy in the church—"God alone is Lord of the conscience," we say, which means no blowhard clergy person gets to tell you what to believe about God. We Presbyterians believe that God works within each of us and each body must discern the truth about God and the world as you are led by the Spirit.

Autonomy is foundational. But as I watched that school board meeting, what I think I saw was an autonomy that had metastasized; it had become mean and aggressive; it was devouring other bodies. This kind of autonomy said "I will not endure personal inconvenience even if doing so could save your life." This autonomy refused any other claim upon the body—even claims made by neighbors, begging them slow a deadly virus.

Something came clear to me again about bodies this week: our bodily autonomy is not absolute. Another way of saying this is that our bodies are not fully separable. "No man is an island," wrote John Donne. There is a connection between bodies. Perhaps even belonging.

In America, we navigate the tension between our autonomy and our belonging through a "social contract." In this contract we agree to restrict personal autonomy for the sake of the common good. There are all kinds of things we can't do in America. We can't drive on whichever side of the road we want. Kroger can't sell moldy food. We can't poop in a bucket and spread it on our lawn. We dedicate a portion of "our" money to things that serve the common good—schools, libraries, roads, sewers, fire departments.

American life is a dance between autonomy and belonging. But over the last 50 years a market-driven vision of autonomy—has been taking over. The message coming from many of our

institutions is not that we fundamentally relate to one another as neighbors or friends or citizens, but we are individual consumers. We pay only for what we want, we don't pay for what we don't want. This vision of autonomy is selfish, and narrow, and rejects the notion that we owe anything to anyone.

If there is any institution that should resist this re-defining of the social contract, it should be the church of Jesus Christ. We believe that life happens through mutual belonging, that the greatest expression of the human being is love. But much of American Christianity has embraced individualism, even promoting an individualized vision of salvation—that salvation is all about your personal relationship with Jesus and whether you will get into heaven or not.

That is not how Christ saves. The Biblical view of salvation is this: God loves the world and sends Jesus to reconcile us to God and us to each other. God saves us so that we can participate in Beloved Community. Salvation is a bit about you and a lot about us.

Christianity does not reject your autonomy. As we said last week, the Bible is a profound affirmation of the dignity inherent in every body. But Scripture says that our autonomy, our uniqueness, even our freedom—all of these can only be understood in the context of our membership in the body. We are ourselves when we belong to one another.

I love this passage from 1st Corinthians. There's nothing cryptic about Paul's picture of the body. There's nothing hard to understand. We are all individuals, each of us is different, each of us has something to offer, but we are inseparably joined together for the good of the whole.

This virus that is tearing through us is also tearing us apart. COVID is a harsh light exposing the deep untruth that has been ascendant in our culture about who we are to each other. We have been left to fight the virus as autonomous individual consumers. Instead of an organized response as one body, it jumps from member to member. Over 600,000 of us are dead.

What was so hard for me to watch the school board meeting was how many of us didn't care. To live with a vision of absolute bodily autonomy during a pandemic is not only foolish, it's deadly.

This is not a sermon about masking. It's a sermon about our bodies. About the body to which we belong. We will never flourish as isolated, autonomous bodies, nor will we ever be saved.

For us to flourish, for us to be saved, we must feel what every other part of the body is feeling. A healthy body is sustained by the practices of listening, of serving, of practicing radical empathy.

When one suffers, we all suffer. When one rejoices we all rejoice.

Who are we? You are the body of Christ and individually members of it. Praise be to God.