

3rd Sunday after the Epiphany (Year C)

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

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. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts.

“As for the body, it is solid and strong and curious and full of detail: it wants to polish itself; it wants to love another body; it is the only vessel in the world that can hold, in a mix of power and sweetness: words, song, gesture, passion, ideas, ingenuity, devotion, merriment, vanity, and virtue.”¹ These words from Mary Oliver remind us, in beautiful prose, of the mysterious potential of our bodies.

Our bodies are wondrous gifts from God, both fragile and resilient, complex and constantly changing. Different bodies work in different ways and, therefore, no two bodies - not even identical twins - are exactly the same. But each body must, in its own way, learn to function and navigate the life of its inhabitant.

It is not surprising, then, that the Apostle Paul would choose the body as a metaphor for the Christian community he was writing to in Corinth. We are privileged to “overhear” his letter to this congregation and, if

¹ Mary Oliver, Evidence: Poems.

we listen carefully enough, we might just glean some wisdom from it that applies to our current situation as a church.

The people who are Beaumont Presbyterian Church are a body - a Body made up of bodies. The body of this congregation was founded 60 years ago in 1959 when a group of people from 2nd Presbyterian Church decided to start another congregation here on the west side of town. And thus, the body we have inherited was born. It was born of the Holy Spirit who called together the founding members, a few of whom are still alive today. And, like our physical bodies, things have changed with time. We are not nearly as young as we were back then. The community around us has changed over the years. The *culture* around us has changed over the years. Things change, bodies change. And, with all change, there are some things we can't control and there are some things we *can* control.

Sometimes, as a congregation, it feels as though it's impossible to find a rhythm because just as soon as we find some sort of balance, some curveball comes out of nowhere and we have to readjust. But rhythms can be found amid seas of change. The physical body you're currently inhabiting serves as a perfect example. The body you have today is not the same as the body you had yesterday, or last year, or last decade. Our bodies are never the same day to day, and yet, a rhythm must be found or else our entire lives would be, well, unlivable.

Sometimes one part of the body is hurting and the other parts of the body have to call an audible to compensate for the disability. Sometimes too much focus is given to one part of the body and the other part of the body suffers because of it. Having all the members work together to form a body that can live a fulfilling and productive life is no small task.

Paul is writing to a congregation that seems to be struggling to work together as one body. We are left to imagine the conditions that made living together difficult so we're left to assume the obvious: living together as a family is really hard. It takes work. It takes patience. It takes forgiveness and grace, growth and compassion. A body working together, at least in my experience, rarely happens by coincidence. Rather, it takes intentionality. A lot of it.

The people who are Beaumont Presbyterian Church, this body that we call home, is in a season of change. You still have a relatively new pastor and we're still getting to know one another. We've said goodbye to several long-time congregants recently, such as Betty Ducharme, Jennie Penske, and Pat Cook. And today we acknowledge that our time with our beloved Office Manager, Christina, is coming to an end as she transitions to an exciting full-time job with her home church.

And, the personnel committee and session are working to find a new office manager but we have come to the decision that we cannot afford to hire someone for the 20+ hours that Christina has been working. Pledges are down more than \$6,000 from last year and we're pulling *way* too much money out of our bequest to sustain this congregation in the long term. Nearly 30% of our expenses are being covered by the bequest this congregation received several years ago and we must work together diligently to lower that percentage. Therefore, lowering our office manager's hours from 20 to 10 is a step in that direction. A difficult step, to be sure, but a necessary one.

Now, I don't usually talk about finances so bluntly in a sermon. But all this is to say, the "body" that we call Beaumont Presbyterian Church is changing. When one part of our body is in a season of change, it affects the whole body. Like today's passage says: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

Friends, we are all in this together. “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.’” Living together as a body is rarely easy. But we need not panic nor fret over of the future because we must remember what kind of body we are: we are the Body *of Christ*. We are called together by Christ to be *his* hands and feet in this broken and beautiful world. We are called together by the Holy Spirit for such a time as this because God is not finished with us; we have work to do! We have each been given, as Mary Oliver said, one wild and precious life and ours is the adventure of navigating that gift that God has given us.

I leave you this day with one last metaphor to help us understand a bit about what it means to be the Body of Christ. Many of you know that I recently joined the gym that’s next-door to the indoor trampoline park across the street from where Tricia and I live. I’ve decided to start off 2019 by taking better care of my body so I’ve been going most days to do a combination of weights and cardio, such as the treadmill or rowing machine. Needless to say, I’ve had a lot of time to observe the gym and, I must say, it’s been an interesting experience. I’ve certainly worked out before, but only in the privacy of my own home. This is the first time I’ve worked out at a gym with other folks around. And I’ve had some time to observe this kind of community.

What I see is this: a group of people beautifully diverse, young and old, of different races, backgrounds, political affiliations, and sexual preferences and identities, coming together for a common goal, to strengthen their bodies together. There are skinny people, heavier people, young people, older people, and bodies of all kinds and colors. I see people working together. Lifting each other up. I see the young trainer helping the elderly woman keep her body strong so she can keep her balance and not fall. I see a group of young mothers building each other up and sharing fellowship by the treadmills. I see pairs of people who are spotting one another while lifting weights. I see a group of bodies together making up a larger body, all gathered to support one another and become stronger together.

Well, that seems like a pretty good metaphor for the Body of Christ. Perhaps we should think of this community, this “Body of bodies” as a place where we come to strengthen one another. A place where the hands, feet, heads, shoulders, knees, and toes all work together that the Body of Christ might be strong and present in this community. As we step more fully into 2019, we have the difficult but joyful task of discerning how God is calling us to be Christ’s body here and now, to be the body that doesn’t exist merely for the “sweet by and by” but for the “messy here and now.”

We, my friends, are a gym. A Godly gym, if you will. Not that we are “better” or “holier” than others. But we are a Godly gym because it is God that calls us together to *grow* together. Let us get to work, stretching our minds and becoming limber so that we may have the flexibility to take on the challenges that are before us.

And, friends, we are in good hands. Your elected session members and I are preparing for our annual session retreat in a few weeks to discern the direction God is calling us in 2019 and beyond. We are in good hands because God is going with us as a friend and the Spirit is guiding us with Her wisdom.

So I implore you this day, to pray for your elected elders and the rest of the leaders of this congregation. Pray for us that we might navigate a way forward so that this ever-changing body in which we find ourselves may thrive and serve God faithfully. So, whether you’re a hand, a foot, a nose, knee, or ear, I invite you to exercise patience, practice compassion, hope relentlessly, pray endlessly, love imaginatively, and work steadfastly to contribute to the common cause of this congregation, as we ever-faithfully follow the footsteps of the savior who redeems us and calls us to serve.

Rev. Stephen M. Fearing

Beaumont Presbyterian Church

January 27th, 2019

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.