

Rev. Adrienne Meier

January 23, 2022

Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

What Makes You Human

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 would 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 would 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.

At the hospice Mother Teresa ran in India, their ministry was to bring people off the streets, people often dying of malnutrition and disease. And whenever someone was newly arrived, a volunteer would bathe them. Over the bathtub was a sign, and it read, “This is my body.” Whatever gifts we have in the world, however they draw us together and aid us in our work for the common good, the truth is that the real gifts aren’t the ones that make you special, the real gifts—the ones worth having—are the ones that make you human.

It is no small thing for St. Paul to use the body as a metaphor for the church. He knew his scripture well. He knew that, in the beginning, in the first story that tries to make sense of how all of this—everything that is—came to be, created at the hands of a loving God...in that story, it says that humankind is made in God's image, according to God's likeness. God pays attention to bodies - infertile bodies (like Sarah's or Hannah's), raped bodies (like Tamar's), incredibly strong bodies (like Samson's), and child bodies (like Samuel's or Jeremiah's), bodies that don't fit binary definitions (like the Ethiopian eunuch's), bodies that are broken, in pain, labeled unclean (too many to name). God pays attention to bodies. God cares about bodies. And to that end, God gave us a meal where the body of Christ—in, with, and under a morsel of bread—creates of this people a body.

To that end, it is worth noting that right before St. Paul talks about spiritual gifts, which began in the section we read last week, right before this discussion, Paul talks about the Lord's Supper. He gives back to the Corinthians the center of their worship: the words of institution, that "... on the night our Lord Jesus was betrayed he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is broken for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.'" And here he is again, just eighteen verses later, talking about a body, one body—the body of Christ that is we who are the church, we who gather to eat and drink, we who gather to worship, we who gather for the sake of the common good. We are a body—it is a tangible image, even a visceral one, maybe even an embarrassing one as we try to imagine the parts of the body that we clothe with greater honor. When Paul calls us *one* body, he is saying, "You think gifts set you apart; I tell you gifts are what make you belong. Gifts are what make you human—made in God's image, beautiful in your breakableness—fully human."

I notice that every time St. Paul talks about gifts, his lists vary: last week, it was wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, discernment of spirits—whatever that means—tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. This week, it is apostleship, prophecy, teaching, deeds of power, healing, assistance, leadership, and speaking in tongues. I know I've seen resources that claim to assess THE spiritual gifts, all nine or sixteen or twenty of them, though they often omit the discernment of spirits, but there is no exhaustive list of gifts. It isn't like a personality typing tests - nine Enneagrams, 16 Myers-Briggs types. Gifts don't work that way, because no paradigm like that can contain the whole of human experience. Gifts are what make us human—they are where our tenderness is stored, our empathy. They are what make us strong when standing up for "the least of these." They give us the tools of discernment to see who is not here, what gifts are not present, not honored. They are never what divides us, and always what unites us.

So, maybe your gifts are hospitality or leadership; maybe acts of service, sure. But however you—we—are gifted will always lead us more deeper into the human experience. Beloved, the true gifts are what lead us into human suffering, because the body that we share at Communion, the God in whose image we are made, our God is fully human. Our God is a broken God, a suffering God. Our God so loved, so loved the world.

Look, this is a hard time to hang onto hope. I know that I have pulled back from a lot of things where I had been slowly venturing out more, going into crowded places, trying new things and old things—mostly, I'm back to the four walls of my office, the four walls of my house, Zoom for this and that. It is draining to be *back here*, back here where I am afraid, back here where I feel powerless, back here where I struggle to find hope. I know you see that where you are, too. You're seeing only a few of your students each day; or so many more patients; or more people who are just done, done, done. Maybe the loneliness is beginning to take hold in ways you didn't think possible. We know that a surge makes it hard on people experiencing homelessness or food insecurity, and those who care for them—fewer volunteers, fewer dollars. It is hard to hang onto hope right now. Our bodies are tired; we are wearing to our bones. How long, O Lord?

I know there are those out there who want to give us some cheery optimism and call it hope. In my opinion, there's never really a time that we *need* that. Screwing on a smile does not tell the truth about the brokenness of the world, does not tell the truth about what it means to be human. This is a time when it is hard to have hope. But here is what we do have. We have a God who had a real body like us. We have a God who meets us in suffering. We have a God who prayed on lonely mountaintops and, on the night he was betrayed, so very alone in a garden, his friends, first asleep, then deserting him. We have God who healed the sick, who blessed children, who made pathways from poverty, and who raised the dead. A God who delighted in real people, real bodily people, and calls us together as a body that we might join God wherever God is found, for the sake of the world, in love for the world.

Amen.