
Fulfilled today in our hearing
Martin Grove United Church
January 24, 2016
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a and Luke 4:14-21

I don't know about you - but I've always loved the text we just read from First Corinthians; where Paul talks about the body of Christ, and the idea that the body of Christ is made up of many different parts. And the idea that those parts, although they are different from each other - and perform different functions, are all seen as indispensable to the whole body.

This idea has led to countless sermons - many of which you may have already heard. Some preachers take this text as a call to celebrate diversity, lifting up the emphasis on the many parts of the body, all different and all contributing in their own way. Some preachers take this text as a call to celebrate small things - the small things that make the whole experience that we call "life" so wonderful. Some preachers take this text as a call to endorse hierarchy in society, or in the church, and lift up the parts of the text that speak to the church organization that Paul refers to, and the fact that some of us are called to teach, some to sing, some to make coffee, and so on.

Well, those are all good messages of course. But my own connection with this text is far less considered and far less theological. My connection with this text - this week at least - is tied together with the fact that recently - perhaps for the 5th time in my life - I managed to get one of my thumbs caught in a door that was closing. I'll just pause for a moment as some of you can perhaps remember similar events in your own life. And since that moment, I have been reminded on a regular basis that something as small as a thumb can have an effect on my whole body. The temporary loss of the "opposable" aspect of one thumb impacted my daily life more times than I care to remember.

And so in some ways, Paul's analogy between the body of Christ and the human body - on the face of it - has some traction. Small body parts that we often ignore can have a large impact on the entire body. When one part of the body suffers, the whole

body suffers. The analogy does seem to work.

But what exactly does Paul mean by the body of Christ? And more to the point, what does it mean to us today? In the words of Malinda Elizabeth Berry, “The problem with Paul’s well-known and maybe even overused analogy of the church and the body is one of interpretation. Some argue that the different rites, numerous denominations, and diverse styles of Christianity each represent a different body part. Others argue that the body represents the local congregation and that we should both strive for and embrace diversity of gifts, ethnicities, and expressions of faith.”¹

I suspect that when Paul was speaking of the body of Christ he was probably referring to a particular Christian congregation. But perhaps he meant something larger and more far-reaching than that.

But what do we think the “whole body” refers to? What meaning for the “whole body” brings this text alive for you? Your own physical body? A single congregation? Our Presbytery? The United Church of Canada as a whole? All of the Protestant denominations together? The entire global Christian community? The entire global community of members of any and all faiths? The entire global community of people of faith including people of no faith - in other words all of the people on earth? Or if you really want to think big - perhaps “whole body” should include extra-terrestrial life too.

On the scale from your own body to the entire universe - what is meaningful to you? What does the “whole body” that Paul speaks of mean to you?

And further, what do we make of the statement that when one member of the body suffers, we all suffer? Is Paul asking us to intentionally suffer with others - or is Paul merely stating the reality that we do suffer when those around us suffer? Do we suffer by association? Do we suffer because we know we might be next in line. And is that suffering automatic - or is it a choice? Do we suffer with others as part of a systematic process that we cannot control, or do we suffer with others because we choose it?

Often, it is a choice. When bad things happen to other people, we can choose to

¹ www.sojo.net - member materials

simply close our eyes, ears, hearts, and minds - or we can choose to open our eyes, ears, hearts and minds to embrace the pain in others because that is the only possible way to embrace the suffering person themselves.

I'm sure we can all think of situations where someone who we know is suffering, and we choose to share their pain, we choose to feel for them, we choose to empathize with them. We choose to grieve with them. Perhaps it doesn't always feel like a choice. As human beings, we are designed and built to be empathetic, to share pain, to care. That's a big part of being human.

If one suffers, we all suffer. The question is not - do we do that. We all do that. We all have experiences of empathetic grief and pain. The question is really - who do we choose to share pain with? Paul says that when one suffers, we all suffer – so who is it that we call “we”? Who is the “we” that we choose to suffer with? “We” is a very small word, but the meaning behind that small word is as large as we want it to be.

I'm reminded of a poem written by Muhammed Ali. It may well be the shortest poem in the English language - which means that even I can memorize it. The title of the poem is the same as entire poem. It's the poem “me, we”, apparently given during a graduation address at Harvard University. Ali's life had many tosses and turns, but one dominant theme in his life was a conversion from being mainly self-centred to being much more community-minded. His life reflects in various ways this conversion from “me” to “we”. In speaking about the “conversion” from me to we, Ali said this, “... what I gained was the ability to see the world in something like the way God must see it. To understand that there are no distinctions of any real importance in the affairs of men, that there is only one time and one place and one person and one truth. And that we are all contained in that time and place and person, and that the truth contains us all.”²

That's a very broad definition of “we”. And I don't know about you but I struggle to embrace a “we” that is so large. I struggle to embrace the “we” in everybody. Or to be more blunt - there are people that I don't want to include in “we”. I haven't got the strength. I haven't got the energy. Personally, I simply can't care about everyone. And so

² <http://www.philipchircop.com/post/5049173602/me-we-me-we-is-supposedly-the-shortest-poem>

I choose. But those choices help me understand my own limitations. And those choices help me to focus on what I do care about.

And yet, I am forced to agree with Ali - if I looked at the world the way that God does, then everyone is "we".

Who is "we" for you? Who isn't "we" for you?

Perhaps there is a practical way to answer that question. Think of stories of tragedy that you know about. Think of stories and people from your own family, from your neighbourhood, from this congregation. Think of stories in the news. What stories touch your heart? What stories do you choose to care about? And what stories seem "just too far away" for you to share the pain and the grief.

Do we share pain when we hear about natural disasters around the world? Did we feel pain when 43 people, including 17 children, died when their boat sank near the Turkish coast this week, or is that too far away. Do we share pain with the people involved in the shooting in Scarborough this week? Closer to home, do we feel pain with impoverished people here in Rexdale? Who do we choose to care about?

And where does all this leave us. Today, in Rexdale. What does it mean to be the body of Christ here - now?

Listen again to the words from Luke, spoken by Jesus. But this time, instead of hearing Jesus speak about himself - let us hear the words as about us.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because God has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. God has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. Today - January 24, 2016, this scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing."

Amen.