

Breathing New Life into a Metaphor

1 Corinthians 12:1-12

Good Morning Church Family,

It's good to be together this morning.

Last week, I was talking with a friend from MCC about this worship series on embodiment. She said, "Oh, that's great! Are you making people move their bodies as part of the series?" And I thought, no, actually I'm not." What an oversight on my part! To be spend all this time thinking and talking about bodies, but not actually doing something in our own bodies.

So, to start us off this morning, I'd like to lead us in a short, simple embodiment exercise. One that we can do right from where we are sitting, no wild dance moves required. Are we up for this? I'd invite you to close your eyes, and take a few deep breaths. Feel the air coming into your lungs, and going out of your lungs. Draw your awareness into your body. How does your body feel? Tired? Relaxed? Joyful? Are there places in your body that are experiencing pain or discomfort? Draw your attention there. I'd invite you to think of those hurting places with compassion and tenderness, as you would for your child, when they've scraped their knee. Feel the ground under your feet. Notice the chair that you are sitting in. Think about the other people who are inhabiting

this space with you. Take a deep breath. Drop your shoulders. Take a deep breath. It is God who puts breath in our lungs. Thank you Lord for that gift. Amen.

Okay. I'd invite you to open your eyes. Thanks for doing that with me, friends.

One of the reasons that I wanted to begin this morning with that breath awareness exercise is because we're talking this morning about breathing. Specifically, about breathing new life into a old, beloved metaphor of church life. The passage that Carrol read for us this morning is very well known, I'd venture to say that I've heard it read or preached on a public setting probably 50 times. The comparison of the Church to a Body works so well because having a body is a universal experience, there's no-body (see what I did there) that is left out be able to understand what that feels like. It's a great metaphor.

Now, the problem with a well known metaphor, even one that works as well at this one, is that over time and many uses, it can begin to lose some of it's "oomph", some of it's impact on the hearers. I remember in my grade 12 creative writing class, our teacher reminded us that using a tired metaphor was, in fact, weak writing. Writing "the news hit me like a ton of bricks" is not as compelling a statement as the "news washed over me like a dark wave enveloping the shoreline." One makes us stop and think, to imagine a feeling and the other does nothing simply because we've heard it so many times.

When I was reading this passage in preparation for this sermon, I realized, for me, how much this metaphor has become disconnected from my real bodily, human experience. Perhaps some of you feel the same. So, for this morning, my hope is that we can breathe some new life into this beautiful old metaphor by telling stories about people's experiences with their own bodies and how that mirrors the experience of the church as a body. By hearing these stories, perhaps we'll be able to see our Church Body in a new way. Perhaps we'll be able to listen to the stories that our own bodies may be telling us about this life together in faith? What would happen if we read this passage from 1 Corinthians anew; with feeling and attention to our own bodies?

The first story I want to share is from my own life. After Junia was born, I lost a lot of weight. Like 70 pounds. The stresses of taking care of newborn combined with nursing Junia and my body began to melt away, like a sugar cube in hot water. My mental health was not great; I was suffering with what I now know to be post-partum depression and anxiety, and I literally felt like I was disappearing. Who I thought I was as a person was disappearing in this new role, a role that I had wanted my whole and was incredibly grateful for, and at the same time the body that I had lived in for 27 years was disappearing. I was not doing well. But compounding the strangeness of my ill health was that I was constantly being complimented on this strange new body. "You look amazing!" "I can't believe how much weight you've lost!" "You must feel incredible! I wish I looked like you." And I would smile and say thank you, but what I really wanted to say is, "You wish you were disappearing? I am not okay."

I think that same thing can apply to life as a church body. The outward signs of a “health church”, lots of people, new members, etc, can hide the struggles of a church.

Conversely, churches that aren’t hitting those supposed benchmarks of healthy and thriving, doesn’t mean they are unhealthy. The appearance of being well is not the same as being well; that’s true for our bodies as well as our churches.

Verses 24-26 of 1 Corinthians chapter 12 say this, “But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” This verse reminds me of Char.

I suspect most of you know this story, but after Char had her first, long awaited hip surgery in the summer and came home to begin the recovery process, she began to hurt. All over her body, different muscles and joints caused her pain. While her new hip wasn’t in pain, she still was. It was, of course, because her body, all our bodies, and the body of the church, are interconnected. Healing one area, put the rest of her body out of whack, her body compensating for the change. Furthermore, when she explained this to her physiotherapist, that she needed her whole body to be treated, to strengthen all parts, she was told, “Sorry, I’m only allowed to treat the hip!” Only allowed. “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honored, every part is honored.” I used to think this verse was a call to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice, and certainly I think that’s part of what this verse is getting at, but this verse is

reminding of the inherent interconnectivity between all of parts, all people of the church. If one person is wounded, hurting then we will all feel that. If there is a gossip problem in a church, it's not just the people who are caught up in it who will be hurt, it's everyone because it effects the whole life and culture of the church. If there is abuse by leadership, then that hurts the whole body. And indeed it should. This passage reminds us that our actions as individuals have impacts, for better or for worse, for the whole of the body. The church, like our body, is gloriously interconnected.

That interconnectedness also means that we need other bodies, we need other people to be in community with. How do babies know they are loved and cared for? There are many ways, but one of the primary ways is through physical touch-cuddling, snuggling, being picked and carried around. In the days before good, strong reseach ethics, a study was done on babies. The babies were fed, nourished and kept clean in a satisfactory way, but they weren't snuggled, held or tended to in the way babies be. Those infants failed to thrive and some even died. We know and experience love through touch- a warm hug, a comforting arm around the shoulder, a warm bowl of soup passed from one set of hands to another. In 2019, a study led by Virginia Satir, a world-renowned family therapist, famously said, "We need 4 hugs a day for survival. We need 8 hugs a day for maintenance. We need 12 hugs a day for growth." 12 hugs! The study found that hugs strengthen your immune system and balance your body, increase your feelings of belonging, increase your feelings of safety, and increase your feelings of mattering and being seen. Just as our bodies need other bodies to be well, we as a church need other people AND OTHER churches to be well. I'm continually thankful for

my colleagues from other congregations and especially other denominations and faith traditions. Those relationships remind me that the spaces and places where people follow Jesus are wide and varied. When the Body of Christ, the Church is only seen as the people you gather with on Sunday morning, we're missing out on the well being that comes from being a part of a larger body, a small piece of a much greater whole than we could imagine on our own.

So those are three, grounded in the body things that we can draw from this passage: Wellness as a church is about so much more than outside indicators, each person in the life of a faith community matters, if one part is hurting, we will feel it through out, and we need to be connected to the larger faith body, just as our individual selves need people, community and touch.

If we return again to our passage this morning, I'm going to read a bit more, starting just where Carrol finished, so verse 13, it says, " Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues[d]? Do all interpret? Now eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet I will show you the most excellent way...that's the end of chapter 12. Paul is reminding us that in all churches there a different people with different gifts, not better or worse gifts, but different gifts. We need all those parts in order for our body to blessed so that we can be a blessing to

others.

Paul ends with..."Now eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet I will show you the most excellent way. That's the end of the chapter 12. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul tells us what that most excellent way is. Chapter 13 is what is famously known as the Love chapter, one that is frequently read at weddings. "Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it is not proud or rude or self-seeking..." The chapter goes on to tell us the beautiful, difficult path that love, real love, as exemplified in Jesus Christ asks us to walk. What Paul is saying here is that whatever gifts, or connections, or health we as bodies and as the Body of Christ try to find, it's not worth much without love. We have to love ourselves and one another as Christ loved, and that is the greatest challenge and the greatest miracle of the Church.

The Late Rachel Held Evans, in her memoir *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving and Finding the Church* wrote this, "If the church is like a body, like a bride, then perhaps we ought to take her through what Barbara Brown Taylor's calls the "spiritual practice of wearing skin":

Whether you are sick or well, lovely or irregular, there comes a time when it is vitally important to your spiritual health to drop your clothes, look in the mirror, and say, 'Here I am. This is the body-like-no-other that my life has shaped. I live here. This is my soul's address. After you have taken a good look around, you may decide that there is a lot to be thankful for, all things considered. Bodies take real

beatings. That they heal from most things is an underrated miracle. That they give birth is beyond reckoning.

“When I do this,” she says, “I generally decide that it is time to do a better job of wearing my skin with gratitude instead of loathing.”

So let's turn the mirror:

This is the church. Here she is. Lovely, irregular, sometimes sick and sometimes well. This is the body-like-no-other that God has shaped and placed in the world. Jesus lives here; this is his soul's address. There is a lot to be thankful for, all things considered. She has taken a beating, the church. Every day she meets the gates of hell and she prevails. Every day she serves, stumbles, injures, and repairs. That she has healed is an underrated miracle. That she gives birth is beyond reckoning. Maybe it's time to make peace with her. Maybe its time to embrace her, flawed as she is.

Maybe it's time to smile back.

Sometimes I think the biggest challenge in talking about the church is telling ourselves the truth about it—acknowledging the scars, staring down the ugly bits, marveling at its resiliency, and believing that this flawed and magnificent body is enough, for now, to carry us through the world and into the arms of Christ

In closing friends, look at your miraculous body, and the ones gathered in this room. See your hands and your feet. Hear the sound of their laughter, feel the warmth in their hug. See the miracle that is your body. The miracle that is each person in this room. And the miracle that is the Body of Christ, Broken and Ressed, for the blessing of this world.

Amen and Amen.