

Body Building

Menno Mennonite Church

January 23, 2022

Purpose: To recall the working of the body together as the function of the church

Message: Rather than the interconnectedness of the body being a liability of the church, it becomes our strength.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31A (Sermon text to be read); Please read Psalm 19

Synopsis: We know the language of the body. We are one. We are connected. We are indispensable. We listen. We nod. We move on.

But do we know what it means or how we function for it? Like the intricately connected parts of the body in our lives, we note the connections of the body of Christ. But we don't always trust those connections, let alone appreciate them. We can be so selective in who we are connected to, why, and when, that it can be some of the least comfortable parts of being church. Especially in an age where our certainties and independence are far more lauded than our vulnerabilities and interdependence, we do well to time and again learn the deep wisdom of the body that challenges time and again.

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

¹²For 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.

¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

¹⁵If 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.

¹⁶And 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.

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 he 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.

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.
²⁸And 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.

²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets?
Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?
³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues?
Do all interpret?

³¹But strive for the greater gifts.

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

We have all heard the cliché: It takes more muscles to frown than to smile. It is one of those cheery little bits of sunshine meant to make us perk up and put on a smile, however we happen to feel about smiling at any given moment. It is harmless enough if a bit off putting if it happens to find you feeling particularly grumpy. The actual anatomical calculations are somewhat disputable, and certainly it is not the 2-3 fold offset that we are often told. More in the neighborhood of 10 vs 12 with more involved in smiling (a hard thing to measure to be sure).

My message is not “don’t worry be happy”, though that’s not a bad take away if it suits you. Instead it is the sheer brilliance of the stuff that we do, consciously or not, on a day to day basis. Our bodies, miracles that they are, have not been somehow simplified and explained by way of scientific research. We might gain insight in the process and the procedure of how things work and why, but for each level of discovery that we are given, we receive a new level of the foundational spark of humanity that can only make you stop and make yourself go “wow.” At least if you are given to such amazement. Something as simple as a smile is far from the willful momentary decision, but the action and response of a huge number of nerves and muscles just to move lips however fractionally. Or take DNA. The much-ballyhooed revelations of encoding the human Genome a few years ago told us that there were about 20,000 genes in the genome that encode proteins, arguably making the body what it is. What is less widely known, including by me until I looked it up this week, is that those 20000 that we have some idea to know what to do with are only 2 percent of the nearly 3 billion gene base pairs that make up our whole DNA. It is just that the rest of the DNA doesn’t function in a fashion that science knows what to do with. The comparison I read was that this is something akin to having a set of encyclopedias—yet another thing I will have to someday explain to my children what that is (it’s a startlingly long list)—having a whole set of encyclopedias and having one sentence of comprehensible text for every 100 pages of unreadable gibberish. Yet our cells interpret these commands in over 200 slightly different ways to produce the cells and organs that we need to live and thrive.¹ Our bodies contain the miracles of creation, both those that we comprehend, and those what we are only beginning to.

With all of this in mind, hear again Paul’s words: *¹²For 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*

¹ 99 percent of the human genome <https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2012/issue127a/>

with Christ. This passage, for us, usually stays at the level of gross anatomy—the stuff that Paul understands after all. If we are lacking in one system or another, he writes, the body is not complete and cannot be considered to be whole. But I would like to consider this on a bit more at depth level, really speaking to the things that makes us up—those nuances and amazing details we are only beginning to comprehend let alone understand—both for the church (lower case C) and for ourselves as people of faith.

Emily spoke last week about the gifting of the church, naming the gifts we are given, sometimes surprisingly, for the building up of the kingdom. She named some of the gifts found within Shalom—the inclination to hospitality, willing service, compassion, a passion for creation care that is second nature—the list goes on and on. All of these spiritual giftings are part of who we are and what we share within the church to make up the body together. And that is good and something which we must, always, celebrate.

The gifting extends beyond just that into what I think we might question whether it is gifting, or the things that can at times feel a nuisance. Here I would expand our focus beyond the four walls of Menno and Mennonites and into the church in general. One of the critiques of the church in general from the outside looking in is “well, if you are all one faith, why are there so many different ways of doing faith?” It is one I get a lot, and one that I think we rightly grapple with beyond “well, them over there just like their thing and that makes them a bit nuts”. Not that this observation is going out of style any time soon, but it does confuse those who are looking to make sense of a story that from the outside coming in does not easily slot into an experience of the world as we know it. But what if those things that make us different—our customs, our explanations and emphasizes both as denominations on the large scale and even congregations within the same grouping could be borne a bit more easily if we understand these things as expressions of the gifting we have been given to embrace the multiple needs of the world. Just as the people need a way of being church with a larger emphasis on symbols and ceremonies, the world also needs the organ of the church that stands in the name of service. No one tradition can capture the richness of faith, no brand of congregation will fit everyone, and each one has its own way of incarnating the Gospel to the glory of God. Even as we rightly struggle with our differences, we must always at least question whether the gift of many expressions is precisely what the God of faith had in mind from the very beginning.

I experienced this vividly when I was doing my student teaching. Before taking a right turn into the life of a pastor which I did not design, I had become a teacher. And being one for embracing the challenges of life, I took on the opportunity to do my student teaching well outside my comfort zone, serving on Chicago's southside as a full time student teacher in a school that challenged me each and every day. I ended up attending a Lutheran church in the neighborhood where we lived, and while there grew to welcome the weekly invitation to commune. Something about being sustained by the weekly taking of Christ's body and blood was a wonderful grounding in a challenging time. It offered me exactly what they offered it for; a momentary grace that offers a piece of hope just by taking part in it. If that is not a sacrament what is? We need the broad gifts of the Body of Christ to be the body that will reach, in time, the whole of the world that Jesus loves.

Secondly on a more personal level, just as we are a part of something way bigger than ourselves, and we individually are composed of more giftings that I think we are readily aware of. As personal as our faith is, a project of individual intention, hope, and yes, discipline, we are also made up of far more than just the workings of that which we know. Perhaps, like the body, we are shaped and formed in ways that we might not even fully comprehend by simple connection to and support of the brothers and sisters we have around us. We receive our spiritual DNA, the stuff that makes us, from those who walk with us, whether or not we are fully cognizant of the fullness of this meaning within us. We are shaped by the experiences of prayerful presence that preserve us, of challenging disagreements that can disturb our thoughts and clarify our thinking. We are formed by those we simply have practices with time and again on ways we are not even fully aware of. I have heard here time and again the reflection of "well, what would they have to say about this?" Or remembering the things that taught us through the years. Especially those of us who have grown up here: the whole way you have known and think about Church is filtered through the saints who have gone before, and that is something for which we can be thankful. As much as we know and need the articulated Giftings of the Spirit, as Paul points out, we dare not underestimate the impact of those examples as the foundational relationships that make us who we are, and give thanks for them each and every day.

We can rejoice, as we must, that there are those who have molded us and shaped us into what we are. They have built our bodies and helped form us today. But we must also know this gift and hear this joy with a bit of chill as well. For now it is our turn. How we welcome each

other now is shaping the body tomorrow. How we sit with that which we have received for its good and righteous gift must also consider that which we would best let go of before we pass it on however well intentioned. We, just by being body together, shape each other now, gifting each other, shaping each other into what we are to become, especially our youth. We are each others Spiritual DNA, and in use Jesus can be known, but also through us we can obscure and block the way by shutting down questions to quickly and easily, dismissing each other too readily, or the many other multitude of things that you can also remember in your upbringing that were less gifts and more burdens.

In all of this, we know that we are shaped by that which shapes us: by Christ who is our head, always. This is the Spirit that unites us, changes us, challenges us, and in whose body we are forever tied. May we know our parts well, stand back and see the work of the Spirit, and be amazed.