

Hands and Feet
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When we read the letters of Paul, as I think Erin reminded us last week, it is like listening to someone talk to someone else on the phone. We only hear half of the conversation. We're not sure what was written by the community at Corinth to Paul, but by his response it is clear that the community is having some differences of opinion. And, most likely, some kind of power struggle. Sounds like some people in the community may be getting overlooked, and maybe others are taking the glory, and – surprise!- they're not behaving the way the perfect church should behave.

Notwithstanding that there is no such thing as the perfect church, I imagine that the question to Paul might be posed in the kind of way that people under stress often employ:

“Paul, don't you think that Erasmus is overstepping his authority?”

“Paul, don't you think that Jacob should just be quiet? He's not a very good speaker.”

“Paul, Lydia thinks she runs the place.”

“Paul, Martha never does anything around here.”

So Paul heaves a sigh, and responds, “We are all members of the one body. No one is more important than the others. We all have a job to do.”

Only, he does it in a way that is much more creative, and much more graphic.

Paul runs down a list of body parts – thankfully, not all the body parts - and says things like, “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.’”

Ideally, the community at Corinth would look at itself and say, “I suppose I have been acting like I'm the brain and no one else matters – maybe I'll get someone else involved who might have different gifts to add. After all, ‘the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you.’”

Ideally.

As community, we are invited to remember that everyone has a role to play. Perhaps, it's an encouragement to remember to look around and see what gifts other people are offering.

Which is great if you are the heart or the hand, and you know you are important.

But what if you're a foot?

This passage always has me looking at my feet.

There is no nice way to say this – My feet are ugly. They've always been wide, so my whole life I have struggled with trying to get the right size shoe. I watched Cinderella as a child, and related most strongly with the ugly stepsisters, who tried to cram their big, ugly feet into the tiny glass slipper and failed. No pretty shoes for me.

Over the years, even though I've never worn high heels, my feet have developed bunions, which makes life even more delightful. Anyone who has ever had sore feet will know exactly what Paul means when he says that, when one member of the body suffers, all suffer together with it. “Sore feet” is a total body experience – am I right?

So, in the world of the church, what if you feel like the big, ugly foot?

Or, maybe you're more like a gall bladder or something, out of site and seemingly unimportant? Before we get too entwined in the gall bladder metaphor, I know people can live without it. But I also know that life with a functioning and healthy gall bladder is the better option.

So what if you identify as a gall bladder?

I laugh a little at this, but I think this is a serious problem for many churches in today's society.

In today's world, institutions are a dime a dozen. Opportunities abound for people to belong to all manner of organizations from bands to choirs to sporting groups. Everyone has a call on your time, but if it gets to be too much, you could just go and find another group. You can shop for something with more pizzazz or less responsibility.

But church is not supposed to be like any other group. Church is supposed to be community, where all are valued, and everyone has a job to do. Church is supposed to be more like family. More like a body – the Body of Christ – where all of the members are important, all have work to do, and where, if one member suffers, we all suffer.

Problem is, when we walk in through the door, many feel like that little gall bladder. Or maybe, like a foot. An ugly foot. With bunions. And what good can I be?

A while back, I watched a silly but delightful movie called, "I Feel Pretty," with Amy Schumer.

She plays Renee, an ordinary-sized woman who struggles with self-esteem. One day, she falls off of her bike in a spin class, bonks her head, and when she wakes up, looks at herself and says, "Look at me – I'm beautiful!" Her body has not changed a bit, but she believes she has turned into someone who could be a fashion model. Of course, this changes her life, and her renewed confidence lands her a great job. Her new attitude propels her to new heights.

Thing is, she didn't turn into a fashion model. She was still ordinarily sized. The gall bladder didn't turn into a hand. But she came to believe in herself – in her beauty, and in her worth as a human being.

There are two big implications, here.

First, the church has to get better at seeing the beauty in the gall bladder - at recognizing when there's a gall bladder hanging out somewhere, either hiding and hoping that no one notices, or hoping against hope that someone will ask them to participate in the life of the church.

Second, the gall bladders and bunion feet have to start realizing their own beauty and worth, and, in order to be a part of the body, to step up to participate in this beloved community.

Let me put it yet another way.

Listen carefully to the language that we employ about church stuff. This comes out at times like the annual meeting. Another year, in a galaxy far, far away, I remember hearing a board member raise some issues about finances. Not that this is ever a problem.

At this time, someone piped up and said, "Have you tried this? Have you tried that?"

If you're following me, you'll know that this is a cringeworthy moment.

Despite it being a financial problem, it would have been less cringeworthy if the person had said, "We could try this. We could try that." It's not about volunteering for the church. It's about BEING the church.

Church needs to have a culture of "we." A culture of "us." Church, if we're going to be vital, has to have an expectation that all members are important, that all are a part of the body – heads, hands, feet and gall bladders alike. To say "have you tried that" is to expect the heads to keep the thing running. To say, "we could try that," is to pitch in, to get all the parts of the body running, and to Be the church.

In the next little while, you'll be hearing about people who have decided to BE the church – to participate in the life and work of the church with their whole selves. Something beautiful happens when we participate in the body of the church together. It comes alive. It becomes a place of vitality.

The community notices it is there, and we become valuable – not just to ourselves, but to the community around us.

My feet are never going to be beautiful – not in the fashion model, high heels way, but they have supported me up mountains and down ski hills and through the swimming pool. They have helped me to walk beside friends in need and have helped me escape from danger. They are never going to fit into Cinderella’s slipper, but they are important to my whole body.

And you are important to the Body of Christ. May it be.