

“Eyes and Ears and Mouth and Nose”

Valley Presbyterian Church – January 24, 2010

3rd Sunday after the Epiphany

Luke 4:14-21

Rev. John Wahl

I Corinthians 12:14-27

Have you seen the TV show called *High School Reunion*? It's aired on a channel called TV Land and is now in its third series. They gather a dozen or fifteen people who, about twenty years ago, were in the same graduating class. Now, they will spend two weeks living together in a Hawaiian paradise – with nothing to do but to relive the past and renew their teenage relationships. Each participant is identified in the show as much by their name as by who they were in high school: not a complex description of their multi-faceted lives, but by their singular distinguishing characteristic. So, there is a head cheerleader and a football star; a nerd and a party animal; a ladies man and a bad boy – you get the idea.

The presumption, of course, is that each of these people will either embrace or try to dispel their high school label. Some want to relive their glory and stay in front, while others will want to shed their baggage and climb the social ladder. They have in common a shared past and – at least for a short time in this island laboratory – a shared present. And because they are all different people, conflicts are bound to develop.

I can't help but wonder what my nickname might be if I were to appear on a *High School Reunion* show. Nothing that is so simplistic and one-dimensional appeals to me or – in my eyes – seems to fit. I think that is what it's like when we think of ourselves in relation to the church. Paul makes it seem so simple. Each person has been given their own spiritual gift and their own function within the body: eyes and ears, hands and feet. Well, then who gets to be the toenail, the pancreas, and the earwax? Would we really value these parts of the body as much as we would value the heart? And likewise, do we really see each spiritual gift as equally valuable – wouldn't those who pray or encourage or interpret speaking in tongues better serve with a hymnal or hammer in their hands?

All of us like some parts of the body of Christ. Maybe we are happy with the way that we confront poverty, or minister to young people, or encourage people to study the Bible, but probably not all those things. We may be happy with the brain and the ears and the eyes, but sense that our feet are listless and that our nose can be too sensitive. Do we really need so much testosterone? And let's keep those love-handles hidden.

In the next chapter, of course, Paul will remind us that the church – and all of its members – cannot function without the essential element of love. It's so tempting

to see God in certain parts of the body of Christ more than others, with pride or jealousy as the almost inevitable by-products. But we know that our judgment about greater or lesser importance excludes so much of life. The incarnation – in Christ and in Christ’s body – is “a beautiful and ceaselessly scandalous revelation of the lush and excessive love and grace of God.”¹ The gifts, the diversity and the love are more than we can comprehend.

Paul was certainly not the first in the ancient world to describe a group of people as members of a body. This image was used often in politics and in other religions, but Paul offers a distinct twist. Previously, the comparison had reinforced hierarchy, and suggested that the lowly workers should obey their social, political and military leaders. Those at the bottom should stay where they are and be grateful for the guidance of their natural superiors. Paul flattens the pyramid and calls for diversity, interdependence and equality. The more privileged members of the body need those of lower status, who play an indispensable role in the community. Even the marginalized, the forgotten, and the less-than-attractive members have just as much worth as anyone else.

Does Paul mean that each church community is like a body in that its elders and deacons, choir members and Sunday School teachers, young and old, are each members with different functions but equal importance? Or might Paul mean that we are connected as one church even though as congregations we worship in our own buildings and use different hymnals; that we still work together to share the good news and work for justice as a diverse but unified Body of Christ? Or could Paul mean that two Christians from opposite sides of the world, or opposite ends of the theological or political spectrum, are to recognize what is common among them more than what divides them?

In a way, we must answer “yes” and “yes” and “yes.” Of course, Paul – in his role as a traveling missionary to the Gentiles - was creating a system of congregations meant to support each other. He often asked new churches in far-away places to give collect and send offerings back to the Christian community in Jerusalem.

But Paul addressed this letter to the young community of Christians in a particular place: the city of Corinth. As a diverse collection of people within a cosmopolitan city, they were now experiencing division despite their unity in Christ. Some had more money than others; some more education; some more social power or prestige.

Less than a generation after Jesus went around dismantling boundaries and hierarchies and distinctions, people in churches were already thinking that some of them were better than others, with more important gifts than others, and doing more important tasks and ministries than others. Even in the earliest churches, these

¹ Debbie Blue, “Dismembership” from *Theolog*

divisions within the church threatened to fracture the community; to drain it of its energy and life.²

Paul, in writing to the Christian community in Corinth, was trying to remind them that life in the Body meant the subversion of those boundaries and distinctions that they had, in all other parts of life, been taught to embrace. To be members of a congregation, they must cast off the differences that divide and welcome everyone and everyone's gifts.

My father always had a difficult relationship with the church. He was the son of a minister and, as during his childhood years, they used to move to a different small town in Illinois or Indiana every couple of years. He used to complain to his parents that he wished that, just once, he could live somewhere that he didn't have to walk through a cemetery on his way home from school. My dad always thought that his dad shouldered too much responsibility for the church body; because he never said "no" to people in his congregation, he sometimes didn't say "yes" to his son.

The final few years of his life, my dad belonged to a huge mega-church on a huge campus that had a huge complex of parking lots. The outer lots were serviced by a tram like those you see at Disney or Cedar Point, but were usually the last to be filled meaning that those parking farthest away would be late for services.

One of my dad's jobs at the church was to care for an "island" in the furthest lot. He was to police for trash and keep the bushes trimmed but, dad decided to do more. He brought plants and wildflowers from his yard, and installed birdfeeders on his island and kept them filled through the winter months. Over time, people began to park next to my dad's green-space week after week, then some more. For them, parking closest to the entrance was no longer a priority; seeing a little beauty in a sea of asphalt had grown to be more important than convenience.

Jack Hayford, a California pastor who leads a growing mega-church, recently said in an article, "They come for the show, but they refuse to grow." He watches as visitors and even members at his church breeze through as if they are at a salad bar, selecting the items they want, taking nothing that is unpleasant or challenging, weighing what they have chosen, and paying only the required minimum.³

The magazine, *Christian Century*, had an article this week about LifeChurch, a multi-campus church based in Oklahoma that now has thirteen sites that share the same web content and video-fed preaching throughout several states. They are innovative in many ways and may represent one forefront of Christian ministry – a consistent message no matter where you are, less staff necessary, fewer human glitches.

² Kate Huey, "Good News, Good Ways"

³ William Self, "Swimming to the Deep End of the Pool"

And yet, in the same article, a local pastor of another church describes the calls he has received from “members” of LifeChurch who have received communion elements in the mail and don’t know what to do with them; or who come to him to perform a wedding or funeral because there is no one available at their church.⁴

In one Doonesbury cartoon, Mike, the central character, was looking for a church, so he interviewed the pastor of the Little Church at Walden. He asked, "How did you get your church started?" The pastor replied, "I took a survey in the community, and they all wanted aerobics, so we started an aerobics class. Then they said they all wanted basket weaving, so we started basket weaving. Then they wanted jogging, and we started jogging. And the next thing we knew, we had a church. It's getting so big now that we have a whole denomination." In the last frame, Mike, who knows nothing about the Gospel, scratches his head and said, "So that's how religion is spread." Is it?

Paul writes, “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” (v. 26) As appealing as the salad bar approach to church might seem, as much as it seems to fit with a 21st century American ethos, I have to wonder what Paul would have said about it. How do certain members not fall through the cracks when the body becomes so dis-membered?

The challenge of churches in this day and age is to foster communities where there is a healthy balance between the human need for connection and for a clear sense of oneself as a person: to be simultaneously a member and a part of the body. In a healthy church community, as Paul envisions for the Christians in Corinth, members of the body can feel compassion for another’s suffering without shouldering responsibility for it; they can rejoice when another receives honor without envy or bitterness.

Is this even possible? Paul says that it is: “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (v. 27) Not someday, but now. Whether you are an eye or an ear, a toenail or an adrenal gland, you are a valued and integral member of the church body – here in this building, and in this community, and in the church universal. Because you are unique, there is unity in our diversity.

And, just maybe, we will be reminded that there is beauty to be found even in the outermost parts of the church complex. There are people using their gifts in all regions of the church – on the front lines and in the margins; in tradition and in innovation; in the care of bodies and in the care of souls. Our unity is ultimately found not in what we do, nor what we believe, but whose we are, and what we are: as individuals and collectively. We are pieces and parts of a body that can never be dis-membered. We are a body. Let us be what we already are. AMEN.

⁴ Jason Byassee, “Synchronized Worship” in *Christian Century*, Jan. 26, 2010