

# Our Body of Christ

A Sermon of The Virginia Synod—ELCA

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Preaching Texts: 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a

Paul, when he wrote this body metaphor of 1 Corinthians should have spent time talking about hips. He talks about all those notable parts of the body: eyes, ears, hands, feet. He talks about the obvious. No one thinks about hips. Unless, (unless) you have ever had hip surgery, then you know just how important the hip is. The hip is an essential joint that keeps the whole body together. We need to praise anything that keeps the whole body together. Not only that, hips support the trunk of the body, the back, the spine, the head. Hips seem to work in the background, unless you dance. Then, hips are important for dancing, which may be why we clothe them. Dancing hips might just get too sultry or if you ask my teenage sons about my dancing, (Pastor McCarty's teenage sons about his dancing) too silly, too embarrassing. Most of the time for most people, dancing aside, hips are just there.

Paul should have mentioned hips, because hips find ways of becoming useful. Hips find ways of being useful that may not match their original intent. Have you ever held a child

on your hip. Maybe you were doing something with your right hand, and the child is a little older, a little heavier, but still of an age that wants to be held. So the left arm holds the child and the hip helps.

Have you ever opened the door with a hip? I open doors often with my hip, especially when I am grilling outside and my hands are full with plates and spatulas and foods and seasonings. Open the door with your hip; close the door with your foot. One of my sons (Pastor McCarty's son) when he was maybe five years old was helping carry things outside for a picnic and went to open the screen door with his hip, and crack went the safety glass. It cracked, broken, but did not fall apart. No shards, no jagged edges to cut him, thankfully. He was upset, but we laughed it off because we knew exactly how he learned to open doors with his hip.

Have you ever blocked a doorway with your hip? Either to get someone's attention, to keep them from walking by you, or to keep them out of the room, our out of the house. Hips have a knack for finding ways to be useful to the whole body. God did not make hips to hold things. God did not make hips to open or close doors. Maybe hips were intended to block entrances—maybe. Hips, however, recognize they do not serve themselves, they serve the entire body. They hold the body together and not only that hips have developed creative ways over the years to make themselves useful beyond what

God intended their purpose to be. Yet, we clothe the hip. Maybe you even find it awkward to talk about hips, to hear about hips.

Here in 1 Corinthians, when Paul takes Aesop's fable and crafts it for the sake of the church, he would have been well served by the hip. This is one of Aesop's fables by the way. You remember Aesop, from your elementary school days. I think most of us have read Aesop's fables at some point during our childhood. Perhaps you have read them to children or grandchildren. Remember the story of "The Lion and the Mouse."

The Lion catches a passing Mouse and the mouse promises the lion if he will not eat her, one day she will repay the kindness. The lion laughs amused at the thought of how a mere mouse could benefit him, but lets her go just the same. Some time passes and hunters ensnare the lion in a net they have left behind. The lion roars in agony, and the mouse returns and eats away at the cords of the net freeing the lion.

Most of you probably recognize that story—my quick encapsulation of one Aesop's more famous fables. Paul, in our reading today, takes another fable from Aesop and modifies it for the Christian community. Actually, Paul takes another famous fable of Aesop, but perhaps not as famous today as it once was. Here is one version of Aesop's telling.

In former days, when all a man's limbs did not work together as amicably as they do now, but each had a will and a way of its own, the Members generally began to find fault with the Belly for spending an idle luxurious life, while they were wholly occupied in laboring for its support, and ministering to its wants and pleasures; so they entered into a conspiracy to cut off its supplies for the future. The Hands were no longer to carry food to the Mouth, nor the Mouth to receive food, nor the Teeth to chew it.

They had not long persisted in this course of starving the Belly into subjection, ere they all began, one by one, to fail and flag, and the whole body to pine away. Then the Members were convinced that the Belly also, cumbersome and useless as it seemed, had an important function of its own; they could no more do without it than it could do without them; and that if they would have the constitution of the body in a healthy state, they must work together, each in his proper sphere, for the common good of all.<sup>1</sup>

Manuel Komroff who compiled this version with other stories of Aesop calls this story “The Belly And It’s Members” but others call this “The Body Politic.” The story over the years before and after Paul has a long history of use and study. The story may originate 1500 years before Christ in Hindu culture. Besides Aesop, the Body Politic metaphor has been used by Plato, Aristophanes, Cicero, and Livy before St. Paul then Plutarch, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Shakespeare, and Thomas Milton after Paul. Some used the metaphor, while others abused the metaphor, like Henry the Eighth who described himself as the head of the church. Though Henry was not alone in this abuse as others used the metaphor to defend a king’s or a pope’s position as the divinely ordained head of the body, a notion that our Lutheran Reformation challenged.

Paul’s version of the Body Politic seeks to curb one of the abuses of the fable. We all have this desire to pick and choose what part of the body we represent. The head and the belly were once two popular choices. Menenius Agrippa described the Roman Senate, of

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<sup>1</sup>Komroff, Manuel, editor, *The Great Fables of All Nations*. 1936 (New Edition) Tudor Publishing Company: New York. p. 70-71

which he was apart, as the belly. Shakespeare has Agrippa explain this to plebes and laborers who did the manual work. Henry Eighth described himself as the head of church and country. Even without such lofty ambitions, most of us want to be something mentionable: a hand, an eye, or ears, or the strong chin of the church. Few want to be the hip or the thigh or the feet of the church. It is like the old vaudeville, the old theater joke of the horse costume. Two actors have to don a horse costume and both want to be the head, neither wants to be the *(pause)* backend.

Paul warns about these problems: Parts of the body trying to be something that they are not. And parts of the body trying to separate themselves from other parts that are not like them. People want the power to name and label, to say you are a foot, or a hand, or an eye, or the nose, all of which misses the point. The gift of Paul's fable comes when you see all parts of the body as essential, so that the label matters not. Which is to say that you are more than a foot, or you are more than a hand, more than an eye, or more than a hip. Whatever part of the body you might be does not really matter. You are powerfully part of the whole body, and the whole body together is a pretty amazing thing? The whole body of Christ, of which you are a part, is a remarkable thing.

I suspect you want to think of yourself as an individual member first and as part of the body second. Such individualism often tempts us as the heresy of the day. Instead of this individualism, Paul asks you to first recognize your place *is in* the body of Christ. Your

baptism makes you a part of this congregation and a member of the body of Christ. This happens before anything else that defines who you are. Before anything else, your presence here in this worship defines you and gives you both purpose and nourishment. What does Paul say? “We are all given the one Spirit to drink.” Which is to say you are nourished by a holy word that feeds you and a holy meal, the Lord’s Supper, that makes real your presence in the body of Christ. It is like this worship is the belly that gets nourishment out to the members of the body.

Also, you participate in the care of the whole body. Recognize from Paul’s metaphor that Paul expects the whole body to welcome other members of the body. “The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” When you hear that we all are members of the evangelism committee that truth lies with what Paul talks about here. Caring for the whole body includes making the entire body feel welcomed and necessary. Reminding one another that they are an important part of the body. We clothe hips and yet hips hold the whole body together. May that be said of all of us.

The care of the whole body is where the hip metaphor works well. Every congregation has tasks that are hard to fill: maybe here counting offering, maybe teaching Sunday school, maybe social ministry or stewardship committees. Like a hip helping a left arm hold a child, we find ways to serve the body based on what the body needs at the time.

Just like hips holding a child. Frankly other parts of the body find creative ways to help out. Have you ever pushed a button with your elbow or with your nose, because your hands held too much? You once used your hands to crawl, because your legs and feet were weak. The human body is amazing and amazingly adaptable, and so too is the body of Christ.

The Body of Christ gathered here today and around the world finds wonderful ways to amaze us. And Paul reminds us the “God has combined members of the body . . . , 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.” I repeat this to you recognizing, confessing what Paul says in Colossians 1:18: The head of our body, this body, is indeed Christ our savior. Amazingly, Christ has bound himself with our weakness. Frankly we should all be clothed. We all deserve these clothes we wear and yet Christ has bound himself to us in one and only one body. We call that mercy, forgiveness, grace.

Just as remarkable, Christ allows his glory to be seen in us. Christ has a lot of glory and it shines in you because of the hip. Today Christ allows his glory to fall upon the hips like a child being held there and the hips shake and dance rejoicing. Even though we clothe them, hips are amazing, for all the reasons I mentioned above. And as Christ’s glory falls upon the hips, the whole body, even though it finds a need to clothe the hip, dances re-

joicing and the whole body is honored. Which is to say that His Glory rests as well on you and in you as a member of this remarkable, amazing body of Christ.

Amen.