

January 24, 2010
Where Would the Body Be?
Text: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

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How many of you, in this exact moment, are thinking about your left foot?
I'm going to ask you, as you are able, to stand up, shake things out a little,
and now, stand on your left foot.

Now, how many of you are thinking about your left foot?

Your foot has been there all along. It's even been doing work, helping to support your body even as you sit. It's also been sending a constant stream of data to your brain, saying essentially "I'm ok. No need to pay much attention to little old me."

It's only when you are asked to think about your foot that you suddenly become aware of it. And when you asked to rely on it for a few seconds, you become even more acutely aware of it. We depend upon our body to be making constant assessments and calibrations, taking in new information and responding in a way that strives to keep all parts of our body functioning, out of pain and intact.

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The image of the body is a powerful way for us to conceive of our relationships to other people, what it means to be alive on this planet at this exact time, at the same time as everyone else who is alive right now. It's a way for us to think about what it means to be a family, and a church, citizens of Massachusetts, of America, and especially global citizens.

Part of why I am so moved by these verses from Corinthians is that they possess a simple beauty. We can talk about the globalized age we live in terms of complex economic theories or shifting geopolitical dynamics. These are helpful tools for understanding the world we live in intellectually. But when it comes to faith, we are called to express that understanding through action.

I can think of no better mantra in action than remembering that we are part of one body. Sometimes it is this simple. Love yourself. Love your neighbor. Love your enemy. Together, you are a body. Each part not only connects to another but requires another part.

Our brain filters data constantly. There is always a part of the body that is suffering. But we can't take it all in at once and there's a lot of evidence that we're not meant to. You weren't thinking about your left foot a few minutes ago until I brought it up. But if your foot had in pain, you would have been immediately aware of it as internal alarms went off telling you to get busy alleviating that pain.

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On the evening of January 12, as we all know, a 7.0 earthquake ripped apart what probably felt like a normal night to most people in Haiti. This part of our global body was suddenly in pain, in crisis.

In this age we live in, the world is in many ways smaller than it once was, because we are connected to people thousands of miles away from us. In a matter of hours, we weren't just

hearing news reports about the earthquake, but were seeing footage of people in Haiti. Human tragedy on this scale touches all of us, and we are made witnesses to it.

But we need to keep pushing on this, because we know there are many different kinds of pain. Prior to the earthquake, 80% of people in Haiti were living in poverty. These miles away, we were at a distance from that pain, which has its roots in colonialism and long decades of debt burden. It's the kind of pain that many, many people live with and that many others try to ignore.

Psychic numbing is one of the terms that describes the scrim people erect to keep themselves at a safe distance from suffering. Sometimes, like in a warzone, it's a survival mechanism. If you dwell too much on suffering in those situations, you risk your life. But sometimes, we rely on psychic numbing not to keep ourselves alive, but to keep ourselves at a safe distance from pain. Researchers have found that this phenomenon is why it's possible for us to know that a genocide is taking place and to do nothing about it. They have also found that the most effective way to pierce the effect of psychic numbing is through exposure stories and images from a person's life.

Once you witness another's life, you cannot maintain that distance.

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If all were a single member, where would the body be? Paul asks us. This is part of what faith asks of us in moments like this – that we open our hearts to another's life and story. That we, in fact, shine a light onto the seams of our own lives and glimpse how we are connected to each other.

We were very calm, I heard a man say after he was rescued in Port Au Prince. He and several colleagues had been trapped in the rubble of a collapsed hotel for days. They kept each other going and even during the moments of panic when it seemed like they would not be rescued, they were able to talk each other through it. In that confined space, their lives and fates were linked together because they had no other choice.

How different is it to see how deeply you are linked to others when you do have the choice? When at any moment you can get up and sever a tie or extract yourself from a community? When you can cut yourself off from Haiti by turning off the TV or radio.

Already, the media coverage of Haiti is diminishing. The headlines still announce the latest developments, but they are sharing space with others news of the day. Soon enough the cameras will be packed up and we'll just get updates from Haiti periodically, the way we do about New Orleans. This is how the media cycle works.

But it's not how faith works. Faith connects us not just during a time of crisis, but in permanent ways. Faith connects us to each other as surely as the head is connected to the neck. Faith calls us to keep our eyes on the truth on the ground. There are people in Port Au Prince who need medical procedures. The bulk of a major city is rubble. The rebuilding of lives and infrastructure will take years, decades.

During this time, it will often be easy to not think about Haiti, the way we don't think about our liver, despite how essential it is to life. How are we going to keep from forgetting. It's easy to stand here and say we won't, but we know how life goes. The world keeps turning. The emergency passes. The world's attention is directed to the next triumph, the next crisis.

One way through is action. One way not to forget is to act as if we are a body, and one that needs to be healed.

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We become aware of our body not just because of pain, of course. Pleasure also jolts us into attention, as does joy. This is how it is that in the midst of the pain in Haiti, there is also joy – as someone is rescued, as a family is reunited, as someone gets a life saving surgery. Joy and relief and a reawakened hope. These feelings co-exist with grief and misery – they do not diminish each other or overwrite each other. They are all true at once, and this is one way for us to conceive of God's role in a tragedy like this.

During tragedies, some people lose faith, and others grow in faith. But any way you slice it, you have to ask the question of where God is in all of this. Why has this island nation suffered so, not just in the past two weeks, but since it was first settled and colonized?

God has been there all along, we want to say, and God was there as the Earth shook. God is witness to this tragedy, and to all the ones which preceded it. How many times has the earth shaken to its core like this? Too many to count, and yet God has been witness to each quake. She is filled with sorrow. She is absolutely present – in the grief of a mother who lost an 11 year old daughter, in the joy of a Mexican search and rescue team who saved a woman in her 70's this week, in the tears that perhaps you shed as you watched footage on TV.

The main city park in Port Au Prince is filled with people who have camped there. There are reports of singing at night and people doing the best they can to create a routine in the midst of chaos. God is there too.

God wills us to connect to each other. God invites and insists upon our involvement. Do not pull away in moments like this, she urges. Now is the time to be the body you are.

What if it is really this simple: We are all part of the same body and we have the choice to either care for this body, or neglect it.

Saying this does not valorize the world as it is. In fact, this metaphor opens the world up to change and transformation. For what is the body but dynamic and ever changing. The body grows over time and becomes stronger and more adept and over more time it begins to weaken again.

We don't usually talk about these things, but I don't think I know a single person who does not have something about their bodies, or its functions, that they would change. Her fat into muscle, his bald spot covered with new hair, the size of her feet, the soft jaw line, an accent from childhood, too much sugar in the blood, a painful memory, a betrayal we can't reverse, a broken heart. So many of us crave some kind of transformation and we may work hard to make this happen.

The body is in a way malleable and elastic; it is also treatable for many of the conditions that ail it. Some of this desire for change comes because we don't love ourselves as we are. And some comes from an understanding that if we do not change, our body will suffer. Sometimes our body will change when we least want it to. For all that we might control, there is a great deal that we never can. This is also true when we think about the global body. Its elasticity. The ways in which we can affect it. The ways in which it is beyond us.

Paul's metaphor insists that all parts are essential. And that whatever assumptions we may be making about what is actually most essential is wrong. This body of believers is like a human body in some regards, but it is also a unique structure. Metaphors are meant to illuminate but never constrain. So while we can argue quite persuasively, that, yes, the brain is more

essential to the functioning of a human body than the right pinky, Paul is telling us that we cannot say the same about the body of Christ in which all parts are essential.

Let us open our hearts to the truth of these verses, to the idea – simple and radical all at once – that we are all connected, that we are all part of a body, that when one suffers, we all do.

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How many of you are you thinking about your heartbeat right now?

Take a moment, put your finger to your wrist until you can feel your pulse. Let's just sit here for a moment as you feel it.

That's the rhythm of your body and it's a constant companion to all of us. It is amazing when you stop to think about it. Those valves opening and shutting. The pressure to keep your blood flowing and your heart pumping.

Each of us has a body that is both flawed and miraculous, fragile and mighty. Each of us is part of the body of our congregation, whether we come each Sunday or occasionally, whether we worship in silence and leave right after the service or sing in the choir and help host coffee hour. Each of us is part of the human body, whether we feel alone and isolated or deeply connected to our brothers and sisters.

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” This is how God means for us to live as the body of Christ, and this is the message of today: Together, we are a body.

What if it's really that simple? *Together, we are a body.*

I'm saying maybe it's that simple. *Together, we are a body.*

Yes, I think it's that simple. *Together, we are a body.*

Can you say it with me? *Together we are a body.*

Amen.