

Body Language

January 24, 2016

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

There is an area in Utah called “Pando.” The name is Latin for “to spread.” Pando is home to the largest grove of Aspen trees in the world. The Pando grove has over forty-seven thousand tree trunks. The grove covers more than one hundred acres. The total biomass of the Pando grove weighs over thirteen million pounds.

Aspen trees are not separate individuals. All the trunks are connected. All the trunks are part of the same root system. So the largest organism in the world—the largest *body* in the world—is not a blue whale or an elephant or a giant sequoia tree.

The largest body in the world on record is the Pando Aspen Grove.

Keep the Pando Grove in mind as we think about today’s text. “*Now, you are the body of Christ,*” Paul writes in First Corinthians twelve, verse twenty-seven, “*and individually members of it.*” The Holy Spirit creates the Church as a gifted body and a body of gifts.

And you are a necessary part of that body.

Let’s work backward through the text. “*If one member suffers, all suffer together with it,*” Paul says in verse twenty-six, and “*if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.*” If you have ever had a toothache, you know the physical truth of that statement.

The Pando Aspen Grove illustrates this as well. When trunks are damaged in one part of the grove, warning signals pass through the roots to all the other trunks. Those distant trunks then take action to protect themselves from the threat.

When the grove is nourished, some of that food passes to the rest of the trunk. All the trunks grow stronger. In a physical sense, the trunks suffer and rejoice together. That’s what it means to be one body.

We are rooted in our baptism into Jesus. I love the words Paul uses in Colossians 2:6-7. “*As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*” Rooted and built up in Christ—that’s where our life together beings.

The Holy Spirit calls us as one body to suffer together and to rejoice together. I see that here at Emanuel all the time. I see it when you organize meals for a member who is ill. I see it when you celebrate the baptism or first communion or confirmation of our young people. I see it when you help a member with hard work or walk with a member who is grieving. This is the real “body work” of the Church.

And you are a necessary part of that body.

The comparison to the Pando Aspen Grove is vivid, but limited. Those trunks are all the same. In fact, the trunks are all clones of one another. They are genetically identical. In the aspen grove, the basis of unity is uniformity. The price of safety is sameness.

When that happens in the church, however, the body does not flourish. When sameness is the price of safety, the body of Christ becomes ill.

Jesus does not demand uniformity as the basis of our unity. The opposite is the case. The unity of the Church is a gift of the Holy Spirit. We are baptized into one body. But, as Paul writes in verse fourteen, *“the body does not consist of one member but of many.”*

Today you received an inventory titled “A Community of Gifts.” Would you please complete that inventory and leave it on the baptismal font? We will collect those completed forms and tabulate the results.

You can indicate those things where you have some skill. You can also indicate those things you’d be interested to develop. I encourage you to sign your name, but that’s not required.

Some of those things help our ministry here at Emanuel. Many of those things impact life beyond the walls of the church. So I hope we can help you use your best gifts here at Emanuel. That’s one of the best ways to feel most engaged at church. I also hope we can affirm all the ministry you do beyond the church and in the community. That’s the most important part of this inventory.

I am honored to serve with people who make such a difference in our community—in the safety and health, the order and governing, the education and nurture, the construction and maintenance, the beauty and compassion of Council Bluffs.

And you are a necessary part of this body.

We are connected at our baptismal roots. We celebrate our diversity of gifts and our unity in Christ. And we know that every part of the body is equally valuable and necessary for the mission of God’s kingdom.

In Paul’s time, the body image was applied to political realities. The Roman Emperor was described as the head of that body. All the other parts were supposed to serve that head.

Jesus turns this upside down and inside out. Did you notice how Jesus describes his own spiritual vocation? He says he is anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

When all our attention is focused on choosing the head of our body politic, we Christians must call our leaders back to their vocation to serve the least, the lost and the lonely.

Paul declares that the head is no more important than another other part of the body. During our recent frigid weather, did you ever suffer from cold feet? I certainly did. How easy is it to concentrate when you feet are freezing? Remember that the next time you think your gifts don’t matter.

We are connected at our baptismal roots. We celebrate our diversity of gifts and our unity in Christ. And we honor all the gifts of the Spirit as valuable.

You are a necessary part of this body. Let’s pray...

Pastor Lowell Hennigs
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