

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Bodybuilding (A Personal Reflection)  
December 29, 2019  
The Rev. Joanne Blair

Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Though Christmas Day has come and gone... we are still in the 12-day season of Christmastide, and so we continue to joyfully play and sing our favorite carols. Music is such an important part of our lives, and more and more, studies show that music not only affects our spiritual and cognitive health, but it also contributes to our physical health as well. So... I think we should take a moment and thank Andrew for contributing to our wellbeing!

This is the last Sunday I will stand in this pulpit to share a message. And as I prepared for today's Reflection (note it is a personal reflection and not a sermon) ... I couldn't help but think of how music corelates to today's reading from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. Musical notes need to work together and support each other to form a pleasing harmony, and this was not the case in Corinth. For the church in Corinth had become a hot mess. Because it was the site of one of the greatest commercial trade centers in the ancient world, Corinth was a very populated and diverse city to begin with. The church was comprised of Jews, half-Jews, and pagans ... and all the cultural and behavioral differences that came with that ... including the question of who was better and more important than whom.

Paul's use of comparing the human body to a community of people was not original ... as it had been used many times in the past to support the status quo. For society in general, and certainly true in Corinth, was the idea of hierarchy. Those at the bottom of the social ladder should obey and support those at the top of the ladder, and all should accept their place and stay there. But Paul uses the metaphor in a new way. Paul reminds the church in Corinth- and reminds us here today- that we are each a member of the body of Christ. And we each have an integral part to play. The point is not how big our parts are... the point is that we all have parts. And each and every part is to be honored.

I have shared this story with you before, but please indulge me to share it again. This is one of Aesop's fables and is called "The Fable of the Belly."

One day it occurred to members of the body that they were doing all the work while the belly was having all the food. So, they held a meeting (presumably without inviting the belly) and after a long discussion decided to strike work until the belly consented to take its proper share of the work. So, for a day or two the hands refused to take the food, the mouth refused to receive it and the teeth had no work to do. But after a day or two, the members began to find that they themselves were not in very active condition. The hands could hardly move, the mouth was all parched and dry, while the legs were unable to support the rest of the body. Thus, they found that even the belly in its dull, quiet way was doing necessary work for the body, and that all must work together, or the body will go to pieces.

Paul prompts us to remember that the body of Christ is not only diverse, it is designed to be so. And for Paul, there is no such thing as belonging to the body without participating. And while some parts may be quieter, or less visible than others, all are crucial.

It is impossible for me not to be nostalgic today. Last Sunday at the 8:30 service, I participated in communion from this side of the table for the last time. And as I spoke the words of institution, I was reminded again that someone had shared their gift of service to come in on Saturday and prepare the elements for us. Parts of the body, working together. When someone is dealing with a challenging time in their lives and would appreciate a person to quietly walk alongside them, we are able to offer a Stephen Minister. A person who has gone through hours and hours of training in Christian-caregiving, to confidentially sojourn with another. Parts of the body, working together.

In times of illness, grief or anguish, I have had the privilege of wrapping a hand-knit shawl around someone to let them know they are loved and being prayed for. They are always so grateful, and they thank me. But I am just the messenger. I don't even know how to knit! But a group meets together regularly and lovingly donates their time, talents and supplies to make these shawls. Parts of the body, working together. I could speak all day on the plethora of service and support that stems from this congregation, often quietly and behind the scenes. Parts of the body, working together.

Last Sunday, this congregation honored Roger and I -- lovingly and lavishly honored us -- with a beautiful reception for my very-soon-to-be retirement as your Associate Pastor. And as we stood before you, and I looked at the long line to greet us, I thought: Where else would we be surrounded by so much love? And the answer is: Nowhere. For we are united in love. We are all part of the body of Christ, and what greater love is there than to be united in that? And what occurred to me is that we have always known your love. I, myself, have been at First Pres since I was 12 years old and you have loved me and supported me through all the various stages of my ages ... of which there have been many.

We have all been different parts of the body at different times, and it will continue to be so. And what Paul would have us know is that whatever parts we play with whatever gifts we have... they are given by the Spirit and designed for the good of the body. We are all equal parts of one glorious body united in love. The body of Christ. Every Christian is a part of the body of Christ on earth. And it is only when we affirm the importance of each unique part of the body, that we truly build and strengthen the whole Body.

We do not abandon our individuality. Rather, we are like musical notes that join together to form a harmony. May our tune always be pleasing to Christ... and may we share it with the world.