

Essentials: Body (part two)

1 Corinthians 12.12-18

April 15, 2021

CONNECT

This is our second talk on *body* in our *Essentials* series. Last week Rikk took us on a tour of scripture in relation to the body. What did we hear? We heard that humans are God's reflection, embodiments of God's presence and character within creation; that every human is made in the image of God, so what we do to the image we do to God. We heard that Christians are given to represent God to the community they find themselves in. So how we think about and what we do with our bodies really matters – not to mention other people's bodies. Jesus' incarnation and resurrection of course is central for all of this. Today we'll take one step further in thinking about the *essential* nature of *the body* as expressed in community.

I want to begin by reading you a poem. R.S. Thomas was a priest in rural Wales and was a Nobel Prize nominee for literature in 1966. He's become one of my favourite poets in recent years. This is his poem called *Nuclear*.

*It is not that he can't speak;
who created languages
but God? Nor that he won't;
to say that is to imply
malice. It is just that
he doesn't, or does so at times
when we are not listening, in
ways we have yet to recognize*

*as speech. We call him the dumb
God with an effrontery beyond
pardon. Whose silence so eloquent
as his? What word so explosive
as that one Palestinian
word with the endlessness of its fall-out.*

Can God be heard? Can God be felt or known? Why can't I find him?

What Thomas does in much of his poetry is face a sense of God's absence or distance and help us be honest about what that feels like through simple yet provocative language. But Thomas also has a way of hinting at the truth beyond that sense of absence or silence. He's owns the difficulty while at the same time making just enough room for the possibility of God to come through – as seen in the poem we just read. Is God silent, absent, withholding? Or is it that we're still learning to recognize the languages, as Thomas puts it, in which God acts and speaks? And what does Thomas mean by *"that one Palestinian word with the endlessness of its fallout"*? As a pastor Thomas spent his life steeped in scripture so I suspect he means Jesus, the word of God, as we hear in John's gospel, the *body language of God*. So I'd wager Thomas is gesturing toward the endless difference Jesus has made and is making. And I'd also suggest that the *endlessness of the fallout* of Jesus includes *you and me*. We are the result of Jesus life, death and resurrection. We are now the body language of God, the endlessness of his fallout. So maybe God isn't silent or absent or withholding so long as we are present and generous to and with one another.

The Picture of "body"

With that in mind and the sermon from last week maybe it's even clearer now why Paul, in the New Testament, chooses *a body* as his great metaphor for the Christian family as a whole. Because God's life and activity is embodied in Jesus, Paul has no problem imagining Christians as the expression of Jesus' *body, filled with his Spirit*. And though we sometimes call it a metaphor, for Paul this picture of the body is much more than metaphor. Christians really are God's representation in their communities as we heard last week. It's no use saying "well just look at Jesus don't look at us". The *point* of our place within creation is that God can be seen *through* humanity. So, God is seen through Jesus and

now seen through the Church as Jesus' body fleshed out in everyday life. I heard someone say once that every interaction is a chance to put each other in touch with God by how we relate to one another. Think about that! That we *really are* the body language of God is an incredible reality to wake up to each day, and a surprising one holding endless potential for discovering how God might break through.

In the passage we just heard Paul draws out *how* God does that breaking through. Not in individual or isolated incidents, but in varied ways through a whole entity. When Paul talks about what it means to be the body of Jesus, he draws out two main truths. The first is about *oneness* and the other is about *difference*. For Paul being in the body of Jesus is to know that we are *one* and we are *different*, that we are *unified* and we are *varied*. And Paul is adamant this is actually possible because of Jesus, even if it seems impossible.

These days we might not know what to do with that! It's easy to feel lost in the algorithms of various faceless collectives, like a number falling into a pre-determined category, which can feel terribly dehumanizing. I had that experience recently with a telecommunications company which shall remain nameless. I was caught in this endless loop of inconsideration, a lost person in a process which reduced me to a monetary valuation. On the other side of things is our society's obsession with *individuality*, which is becoming so relentlessly particular that many are wondering *how* we'll ever find any shared ground or unity if all we do is define ourselves by our differences and sense of autonomy. So I think Paul's vision of Jesus' body fleshed out in 1 Corinthians 12 is wonderfully good news for today. He says that as a body we are *one* in Christ, and we are created with *difference*.

Oneness

Let's talk about oneness. The first thing to notice is that the body Paul is speaking of is definitively *Jesus'* body, meaning that Jesus owns and directs it. So being a

Christian is not a club, or a social circle, or a place for extreme group think. The Church is a community gathered around, defined by and directed by Jesus. Rowan Williams says it this way “*Church always begins with what God is doing... The Church begins with a lot of people, as it were, drawn into one room by the force of Jesus’ personality and life and death and resurrection, and kind of looking at each other and thinking, ‘What are we doing here together?’ and working it out...*” So being Christian springs only from Jesus (sounds silly to say but needs to be). Being a Christian community means being owned and directed by Christ.

And being Christian isn’t something I can do alone, just me and Jesus, because he’s got this terrible habit of always inviting more people to the party! To be Christian is to be plural, never singular. So there is first an orientation around Jesus who gives purpose, shape and direction to those who *together make up his body*. And when Christians lose sight of Jesus and the unity shared through his character and purpose, that community ceases to be Christian. As Paul says, we aren’t unified by anything other than by Jesus and his Spirit in us. Which is both wonderful, because of the diversity represented, but also messy and complex and can take some getting used to.

Difference

This leads to the other reality Paul draws out, that of variation or *difference*, which is not something to be feared or ignored but treasured and celebrated. There is room within Jesus’ body to uniquely be the body part we are, each playing an irreplaceable role. This is where a Christian vision of community is truly beautiful. Paul can say that within this body that ethnicity, sex, economic status do not first define you, but relation to Jesus defines you and holds you together with others in equality. I had a professor who used to say that Jesus is “the great equalizer”, and when he said that he was speaking about these kinds of words from Paul. Of course we’re still struggling to work this out. Usually we only

prioritize equality based on sameness – not so with Jesus! The only sameness we need emphasize is the sameness we share as God's image bearers and our sameness in relation to Jesus.

This sense of difference commingling in a community founded on equality was totally alien in the ancient world. And much of what we've inherited today is because of the Christian vision of what human community can be on equal footing, oriented around Jesus.

Yet still we have a hard time seeing the possibility of Jesus' vision. Often we think only in terms of either mass conformity or individualism, which I mentioned earlier. Being in the body of Jesus doesn't mean either of those things. When we join up with Jesus we don't meld into some kind of faceless collective, losing any autonomy or personality. Quite the opposite. We are identified as persons (or body parts) uniquely identified within a community bringing something particular to the table. And because of the equal orientation around Jesus there are no parts better than the others. So for those of us who are used to being "on top" or always given priority, learning to be in the body might be humbling. We're important, we have a place and a role, but never over against another "part", as Paul points out.

On the other end of the spectrum, some of us like to see ourselves as outsiders or non-conformers, and can get comfortable wearing that label, keeping the realities of community at a distance. But that self-alienation isn't necessary in the body. We've been welcomed in by God and, as we heard earlier, can look around at the others and trust that we really do belong, and that the others belong too. So our expression of difference isn't lost as there is room to be the person God made us to be. That doesn't mean we don't change, that there's no conforming into the "likeness of Christ" as we hear elsewhere. If we're Christian we should expect change and conformity to Jesus, not to one another! We are different, yes, but our identity isn't rooted in difference, but in Jesus. Another picture from Jesus in John's gospel might come

to mind here as a helpful picture, "*I am the vine; you are the branches*" (John 15.5)

So when we think about differences which are cultural, or with personality, or spiritual gifting, the body is about as diverse as the complex ecosystems we study within creation. So the differences are something to be curious about, explored and celebrated! One of the reasons we love sharing our stories in this church is in order to do just that. Next week is story Sunday where a few people will share their story when they were baptized on Easter Sunday. One of the great joys of Christian life is simply listening to the wide array of stories from one another, everyone coming together around Jesus and just asking "*How did you get here? Let me tell you how I got here!*" And maybe that would make us think of our refugee efforts. In helping this couple make it to Canada, already part of the body, we'll have the chance of hearing their stories and appreciating both the oneness and difference that we share. The more the merrier!

Endless Fallout

So if we have to say one thing to each other when reflecting on a passage like this, maybe we need to say *you belong with me because we belong with Jesus*. You belong with me because Jesus had made you to belong. Of course, belonging with Jesus in the company of others takes time to trust and accept and grow into, and we're all learning to do this. So we have to keep finding ways of saying to one another *you belong* in this body that really is one, interconnected, inseparable. And we need be more comfortable with saying *you belong as a specialized* part of this body and finding ways to express the specialization. So don't sell yourself short, and don't sell other people short! Being a Christian means celebrating unity and celebrating difference! Those things don't have to be mutually exclusive with Jesus. That's great news! That's a community filled with possibility and purpose.

That brings us back to R.S. Thomas and his words about Jesus' and the *endlessness of his fallout*. Can God be heard? Can God be felt or spoken to? Well, can you be felt? Can you be spoken to? Can you be known, be listened to or listen? What can you do or say or be that no one else can? What life or world can you permeate in the unique way God has made you? And who is around you and what difference is there to be celebrated? How can we as a group discover ways of working together in order to represent God to the broader community, finding unique ways to introduce Jesus in the special place we're located? As a local church we're at our best when we prioritize oneness, celebrate difference, and express ourselves not as a kind of pre-determined, pre-packaged franchise, but as a community curious about what is to be discovered about love and service right here and now. It's then we see God's endlessness pressed through the presence of this community! You and me alone aren't *endless*, or full of all that much possibility by our own design; but in the community of Jesus, recognized and realized in that body, we become *endless* in our possibility of putting others in touch with God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What strikes you (or has struck you over the years) about Paul's picture of "the body" for the Church of Jesus.?
2. What do you find encouraging about this reality? What do you find challenging?
3. What have you learned about the part you are, or play, in the body of Jesus?
4. What do we need to keep in mind as we function as a body together? What good or harm can be done if we keep or don't keep these things in mind?