

19TH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST | SERMON

1 Corinthians 12:12-31 | Luke 18:1-8 | October 20, 2019 | The Rev. Catherine Healy | Church of St. Paul & the Redeemer

Quite a few years ago, I had a therapist who loved to use lengthy extended metaphors. I otherwise liked her fine, but I got sick of hearing about how my family dynamics were like taking care of fish in an aquarium, or how my feelings were like tuning a guitar.

I was complaining about this to a friend of mine, also a therapist, and repeated a long story that my therapist had told me about how taking on other people's tasks at work was like changing their tires on the side of the road and if you always change people's tires for them you both start to believe they can't do it themselves and—

I was annoyed when my friend said: "Ah. See how you remembered it?"

"Now the image is in your head. And even if you're not ready to process it, the next time somebody tries to make you do their job for them, you're going to think: 'You know what? I don't have to change this tire.'"

"Therapists love extended metaphors because know your brain is good at remembering them. So we use them when we want you to remember something important."

I've been thinking about this while reading through 1 Corinthians over the last several weeks, since Paul was the king of extended metaphors. Faith is like a boxing match,¹ or a growing plant,² or the foundation of a house.³ But nothing compares to the one we just heard about the body of Christ.

I am not convinced that I would want St. Paul as my therapist, but I do think he is taking a page from the same playbook. When we see an extended metaphor this long and involved, the point is for us to remember something important.

To me, the image of Christ as one body with many members is a profoundly beautiful one, in part because it is universally understood. Not everyone has changed a car tire. Not everyone knows how to box. But every one of us has a body.

If you are thinking and breathing, you know what it means for the parts of your body to work together. And if one part of your body is hurting, I don't need to tell you how much it will affect everything else.

There is a lot in here to remember, the most obvious being: We are not all supposed to be the same.

Last week, my small group spent some time talking about how often we have each wished that we had someone else's set of gifts, instead of our own.

But if the whole body were one giant eyeball—which is a horrifying image—there would be no hearing. If the whole body were covered in ears—also horrifying—there would be no sense of smell.⁴

If we were all visionaries, where would the execution be? If we were all caught up in the details, where would the vision be?

God needs all of us together, *and* each of us specifically. If we are able to remember that we are one body

¹ 1 Corinthians 9:24-26.

² 1 Corinthians 3:6-8.

³ 1 Corinthians 3:10-15.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:17.

moving in the same direction, our differences are what make us strong.

And there is also room within the body for each part to be weak sometimes.

In the body, when one part is injured, the other parts find a way to compensate. The muscles around the injury get stronger. The other side learns to carry a little more weight.

But what if the injury is hidden? In many cases, it won't heal right. It festers and becomes gangrenous. The whole body suffers until it is brought out into the fresh air.

In the body of Christ, when one person is struggling, others are called to step in and help.

Sometimes you will be the one struggling. Sometimes you will be the helper. But if one member is cared for, the whole body benefits. You are no less a part of the body when you are feeling weak. And if you accept help when you need it, you show other members that it's okay for them to do the same.

But the genius of Paul's metaphor, the really daunting part, is that the body is infinitely elastic in size.

It is an image of how to treat the people who live in your house. And then, as the zoom lens moves outward, the people in your church. And then, everyone you know. And then, everyone you don't.

We know that when one member of our family suffers, everyone suffers. It's harder to remember that our fate is intertwined with that of people we will never meet, in places we will never go.

But our task, in the church, is not just to support each other through personal struggles. It is to look outside our walls and ask: Where in the world is the body going hungry? Where is it exploited? Where is it sick?

I look at SPR's efforts to feed people—through our food pantry and garden, through our school lunch ministry in Haiti—and I see the body of Christ at work. We donate money, bring in boxes of cereal, and volunteer our time not because we are such good people, but because when one person anywhere in the world goes hungry, we are also starving to death.

We are called to love one another as fully and selflessly as Jesus loves us, and to embrace our interdependence as members of one body. Depending on others isn't a failing. It's how we are meant to be.

So, just this one time, let Paul of Tarsus be our therapist, and let this be the metaphor that sticks in our heads. Each one of us is necessary and valued. Each one of us depends on all the others. And the good of one is bound up in the good of all.