



First United Church of Oak Park

Connected

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

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January 27, 2019

“Motion is lotion,” says my doctor as she encourages me to be active and keep my aging body as supple as possible.

“Eat food. Mostly plants. Not too much,” counsels Michael Pollan, as he offers his readers a few rules about healthy food and healthy eating.¹

We are a well-educated people. We know how to take care of ourselves and we know the things we should do to stay healthy. And, happily, most of us have adequate resources available to pursue those goals. But, do we actually follow through and do the things we need to do, in order to be healthy? Or, are we more like someone I talked with last week who admitted that she needs to take better care of herself? I don’t know about you, but much of the time I feel like I am in the latter group – the “I need to take better care of myself” cohort. Whether it is getting more exercise, or curbing my appetite for sugar and fat, or avoiding blue screens for at least half an hour before I try to sleep, there are many choices I could make, almost on a daily basis, that would improve my health. Yet, I do not always make healthy choices for my body.

The same thing could be said about the church in Corinth, which Paul likens to a human body. You are the body of Christ, writes Paul, and individually members of it. Paul takes the Corinthians to task, because they are not taking very good care of their body. What’s going on? A lot is going on, really. There are 15 chapters in this letter, and, in almost every single section of it, Paul addresses some sort of conflict or misunderstanding that plague the church in Corinth. To put it in a nutshell. . . .

- Different factions in the church argue about which of their leaders is better.
- Other factions argue about the spiritual practices that they imported from their past; not everybody’s on the same page.
- They argue about whose spiritual gifts are the best; the tongue-speakers think themselves better than everybody else.
- The church is ignoring the needs of some of its members.
- The stronger, more privileged people in the congregation are pre-empting the decision making, and they are over-riding the opinions of the weaker and the needs of less privileged folks.

It’s a mess. And, the Corinthian church is not the only church in the ancient world to find itself in this conflicted situation. Paul’s letters address this sort of thing in several different churches. There are extraordinary tensions in his congregations between people of different ethnicities and varying religious backgrounds. Each of these churches is fighting, but in its own unique way and over its own unique issues. Yet, in every one of these situations, there is a group that is kind of winning, and another group that is kind of losing.

¹Michael Pollan, *Food Rules: An Eater’s Manual* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), Table of Contents.

And, in every situation, Paul reprimands the winning group, the stronger group.² Paul pushes back against the group with the louder voice, the forceful group that has imposed its own standards and practices on everybody else. He tells the stronger group to hold back, to restrain and maybe even reverse themselves, and to make space for people who are different from them.

So, for example, Paul unloads on the rich people in Corinth. They have been coming to celebrate the Lord's Supper, and they've been bringing some wonderful food to share – but they have only been sharing with other rich people. The poor people are consigned to the less desirable seating section and they eat what they bring, too, which is less sumptuous. Paul tells them to cut it out. Everybody's supposed to be welcome, says Paul, and everybody's supposed to share. That's what this table is all about. Paul insists that class distinctions based on wealth should be kept out of congregational life.

Class is just one thing. These good Christians also make distinctions based on all sorts of things. Paul has no patience for any of it, and he is especially critical of any group that is lording its agenda over another group.

There needs to be room for everybody, says Paul.

The dynamics that Paul confronts are not unique to the ancient world. We are captive to the same dynamics. Who are the strong and weak voices in our congregation? Over whom have we ridden roughshod, and to whom might we need to make amends? Who are the weakest among us? Our emphasis over the last few weeks on mental illness and the church reminds us that those who struggle with mental illness often feel unwelcome in the church; they are unsure about where they fit, or if there will be a seat for them at the table. They are not sure if they can tell their story, at least not in safety. Some fear that if they are honest about their condition, they may not be welcome.

As I was working on this sermon, a line from the Beatles song Eleanor Rigby came into my mind. I wasn't looking for it; it just floated in. "I look at all the lonely people." When Eleanor Rigby died, no one came to her funeral. Father MacKenzie wrote a sermon that nobody heard; no one was there. It made me wonder: Who are the lonely people connected to First United, who might be around, but whom nobody really sees and with whom we fail to connect? Who are the lonely people?

One of the things I most admire about First United is the liveliness and tenderness of the church's conscience. That is evidenced in the strategic plan, in which we find goals like diversifying our worship service and creating a culture of care. We have goals like that because we know we are not supposed to leave anybody out, and we recognize that we need to do a better job of making room for others.

So, diversity in worship. How are we going to get there? I do not have a plan, though I have lots of ideas. I also know that when we really start fiddling with worship, people are going to be unhappy. Worship gurus say that if worship is truly diverse, most people will be unhappy with it some of the time. The goal they suggest is that everybody is happy with about 80% of worship on any given Sunday; they warn, however, that my 80% may be quite different from yours, and that I may love what you hate, and vice versa. We need to make room for each other. We need to modify our expectations. Those of us with the loudest, strongest voices need to speak more softly. And sometimes, we need to keep our mouths shut and listen. That's not easy to do. Easy or not, this is what our leaders believe God calls us to do.

²I base my interpretation here on the work of Philip F. Esler. See, for example, his commentaries: *Galatians* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1998) and *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

We also believe that God invites us to deepen and broaden the culture of care in our congregation, so that all people in our orbit experience the church's love and support. But, we're human. We have hurt each other. We will probably hurt each other again. How do we learn to care for each other given our brokenness, our need to forgive and be forgiven? We're human. Some of our voices are louder than others, and some of our personalities are more forceful. How do we make space for the quieter or less forceful people in our midst? How do we give ourselves an opportunity to learn from the wisdom and maturity that they bring to the table? We're human. We like to win. But how do we learn to conduct our church life so that it isn't about winning or losing, and it becomes more about being faithful? We're human. How you define faithfulness may be different from how your neighbor defines it. And it may be different from how I define it. How do we make space for multiple expressions of faith and spirituality, while at the same time maintaining our unique identity as a congregation?

Paul leads straight from his reflections on the body of Christ into what is perhaps his best-known passage, the hymn about love:

"Love is patient and kind. It is not jealous or boastful. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." (I Cor inthians 13: 4-8a)

Church life isn't about winning or losing. It's about normal human beings, with all our fears and flaws and quirks learning how to make space for each other. It's about learning how to love each other.

Let us pray:

God of life and wholeness, we come before you as the human beings we are.

We seek your healing grace:

For the divisions that divide us

For the prejudice and racism that distort our vision

For the illness that torments us in body or mind

For our narrowmindedness about others and our blindness to human need

For all that distorts our faithfulness.

Fill us, we pray, with a love that is patient and enduring and strong,

And grant us your peace.