

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Embodied Faith

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Invocation

Eternal God,

In the reading of the Scripture, may your Word be heard;

In the meditations of our hearts, may your Word be known;

And in the faithfulness of our lives, may your Word be shown.

AMEN.

Scripture Reading

New Revised Standard Version: Updated Edition — 1 Corinthians 12:12–31

12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members yet one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect, 24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work powerful deeds? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But strive for

the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Introduction – Tamagotchi

When I was a boy, we had this toy called a Tamagotchi – I don't know if anyone remembers those. It was this little keychain device with a simple video game on it. You got this little monster, and your job was to keep it alive. It would prompt you to push a button to take it on a walk, or feed it, or clean up after it. And it lasted for months if you kept up with it. You just had to keep the little monster alive.

I read online recently that the smart watches many of us wear are essentially just Tamagotchis. Except the little monster you're trying to keep alive is you. Your watch tells you when you need to go for a walk. It tracks your nutrition. It can alert you when something's wrong with your body.

Bodies matter. And I've been wondering this week: if we had a way to track how our body as a church was doing – a spiritual fitness tracker, if you will – what would we find? What would the readout show us?

Incarnation Continued

This series began a little while ago in John's Gospel, with the doctrine of the Incarnation. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14). The

Logic of God — the way God sees the world coming together — came to be flesh and blood in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus isn't some spiritual being, some ethereal energy floating out there in the cosmos. Jesus became flesh and blood, a living breathing human body, to show us what it means to be fully human.

What I find striking about that, especially when placed alongside our text this morning, is that we are being invited to participate in the incarnation. That word participate is important. Jesus has already done the work — the Word has already become flesh. We don't have to carry the pressure of that. But Jesus is inviting us, the church, to become his body on earth.

There is a poem attributed to Teresa of Ávila — though scholars aren't entirely sure she wrote it, it may be misattributed. But still, it is brilliant:

Christ has no body but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours, Yours are the eyes with which he looks Compassion on this world, Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good, Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, Yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours, Yours are the eyes with which he looks Compassion on this world. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

But Paul would tell us that like any body, the body of Christ — the church — is capable of sickness. There are symptoms that can reveal when something isn't right. When we see them, it's like the fitness tracker is flashing red.

Sickness in the Body

Superiority

Paul imagines the body parts talking to each other, which can be a little silly to picture (and also likely the next movie from Pixar). But imagine your eyes making their case for being the best. They could probably back it up — they're how you see, you can close them to sleep, and they come in an impressive variety of colors.

But a body that's nothing but eyes would be the stuff of absolute nightmares, wouldn't it? And not only that — a body made only of eyes couldn't hold onto anything. It couldn't taste anything or smell anything. It couldn't embrace anyone.

Now, maybe none of us are quite arrogant enough to think the church would be better if everyone were exactly like us. But there is a subtler version of this that floats around in the body. When we're making decisions together, when we're trying to serve our brothers and sisters in need, if you find yourself thinking there is only one right way to do something — and it just so happens to be your way — that's a hint of sickness. A mild case of superiority in the body. And it's not the only one.

Inferiority

Every now and again, when we're looking for volunteers, we hear a common refrain: "You wouldn't want me. I don't know the Bible as well as you do. I don't speak as eloquently. We hired staff for that — they'd probably do it better." First of all, most of the people I hear saying this have more than enough skill to do kingdom work, so please don't sell yourself short.

Paul puts it plainly: "If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body." (1 Corinthians 12:15). We need each other — all of each other. There is no room in the body for anyone to assume they aren't needed, that their gifts aren't necessary for the work of the kingdom.

Let me take Paul's illustration one step further.

I spend, on an average day, exactly zero minutes thinking about the importance of my pinky toe. I know it's there. I assume it's doing something useful. I just don't think about it much. Unless — unless I stub it in the middle of the night. Then I'm thinking about it every second of every day until it heals.

When a vital member of the body holds back, when someone assumes they're a pinky toe because no one seems to be

paying attention to them, it radiates pain through the whole body. We all need each other. All of us.

Exclusion

To actually say to another member of the body, “I don’t need you,” is one of the most dangerous things we can do. One of the ways we can check ourselves for this — however uncomfortable it might feel in the moment — is to ask: who is it that isn’t welcome here? LGBTQIA folks? Black folks? Latina folks? Democrats? Republicans? Rich folks? Poor folks?

We have to keep asking the question, because in our brokenness we are hard-wired toward exclusion. It’s a temptation we’re always going to face, which means we never get to say “Alright! We made it! We’re inclusive!” and put the question down. We’re going to have to keep checking. But the checking can be its own kind of joy.

Because indeed, we celebrate diversity in the body. We don’t fear different ideas around the table — we celebrate them. We don’t fear different voices in the congregation — we celebrate them. We don’t fear the stories of Christians whose life experiences are wildly different from ours — we celebrate them.

Diversity isn’t a weakness. It isn’t a term invented by politicians in the last decade. It isn’t a box to check on a hiring form. Diversity is a celebration. It’s a party. And we want it to be as big and inclusive and welcoming as we can possibly make it.

Training

Still — if we're going to be a body in the world, specifically the body of Christ, what are we here for? What are we aiming this body toward? I've come to learn about myself that I struggle to take care of my body unless I'm training for something — an event, a race, a goal. So what are we training for?

A Still More Excellent Way

Paul ends our reading today by celebrating the variety of gifts the body needs and inviting us to strive for them. But then our reading closes with something wonderfully cryptic: "I will show you a still more excellent way." Well — what is it, Paul? What's the most excellent way?

Remember that in the original Greek of this letter to the Corinthians, there were no chapter and verse numbers. So the end of our reading would have flowed without pause into the next chapter, 1 Corinthians 13.

I've done more weddings now than I think I can count, and I believe I've read 1 Corinthians 13 at somewhere around ninety-five percent of them. It goes like this:

"If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not

have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Corinthians 13:1–7)

Not hard to see why that gets read at weddings. But Paul wasn't thinking about weddings when he wrote it. He was thinking about what the body of Christ is striving toward. The church — the body of Christ — is striving for agape love.

Love Needs a Body

Love cannot simply be a feeling we have when we watch romantic movies. Love is not an idea — something we can reason our way to from a safe distance. Love is certainly not a bumper sticker on our car talking about who we love.

Love needs a body. Love needs hands and feet. Love needs boots on the ground. Love needs material resources. Love needs attention. Love needs a body. And so — this I believe, church — this is what we are called to:

We are called to be a Community Living an Embodied Faith

A Community

Paul is right: we can't do this alone. We need the body of Christ. The whole body of Christ. And so we live in community together. We engage in this life together. We support one another through this life. If one part suffers, we all suffer with them. If one part rejoices, we all rejoice with them. Whatever this life turns out to be, we want to live it together.

Living

There is a narrative out there in our world about what the best life looks like — and it tends to involve accumulating as much as possible for yourself as quickly as possible. But we have a different narrative in Christ, don't we? We live a life marked by humility. We live a life marked by forgiveness. We live a life marked by generosity. We live a life marked by inclusion. We live a life marked by love. Maybe that's precisely why the community part is so important: we're going to be swimming upstream living this kind of life. But it is a more excellent way, isn't it?

Embodied

Being embodied — participating in the incarnation with Christ — means getting out there. It means we think it's better to sit down and have a real conversation with someone in our community than to offer a tweet. It means we think it's better to show up and serve our brothers and sisters in need than to simply write a check. It means having a little skin in the game

— the kind of love we put into the world is likely going to cost us something.

But it also means we are called to behold the wonder of the world. We show up to hear stories. We show up to see sights. We show up to be good neighbors. We show up to enjoy this life of faith together as embodied people.

Faith

Faith is all about trust. It's about more than what you believe in the abstract — it's about putting belief into action, saying by the way you live that you actually trust something. And so around here, we trust in the Logic of God made flesh in Jesus Christ. We trust that the way of life he offered us is the more excellent way. We trust that when we choose less excellent ways — and we will — Christ will offer us the same forgiveness and grace he's been offering the world from the beginning. We trust that Christ will work all things for the good. We trust that Christ is reigning in this world, now and always.

May We...

May we continue to participate in the incarnation by being the body of Christ.

May we leave behind the tired sicknesses of superiority, inferiority, and exclusion.

May we lean into the more excellent way of agape love.

And may we be a community called to live an embodied faith in Christ Jesus our King.

Amen.



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