

An Interdependent Body
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1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

I have a confession to make: I spent Monday paying absolutely no attention to any inaugural events. Instead I was digging into material to prepare for the Annual Meeting later today, and doing a first reading of this set of lessons. In light of everything that's happened since – and has it only been six days? - I'm not sure the lectionary could have served up a much better set of readings that fits with all of it. They contain several bedrock-type reminders of who, and Whose, we are. It's this bedrock that stands in stark contrast to the avalanche of executive orders and outright hate that's been streaming out of DC since Monday night. 1 Corinthians reminds a fractious and argumentative community that every member of it matters, and that despite their differences, they are all in it together. And Luke describes Jesus' teaching in his home congregation, complete with the declaration that he is taking on the prophet Isaiah's task of bringing good news to the poor and proclaiming the year of God's favor.

What particularly stands out in these readings are the themes of community, unity in diversity, and interdependence. Paul devotes much of his correspondence with the churches at Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia, Thessaloniki, Colossae, and Rome trying to explain it. The members of these churches, and others that he founded, struggled to live into the reality that we are all one Body in Christ, and we are called to embrace the diverse set of gifts that such a body contains. Note that this is not an individual sport. Paul's concern in all of these Letters is with the community as a whole. That is why he spends so much time trying to explain what it means to be a part of a body where all the

different parts have to work together, and where things like petty class distinctions, which were a hallmark of life in the ancient world, should no longer matter in the face of things like the price of food spiking and the abuse of power. It's hard to say it more clearly than he does: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor 12:26, NRSV).

In other words: there's no room for "I've got mine, too bad for you" or "I'm better than you" or "Why should I care? It doesn't affect me." That was one of many major challenges the church in ancient Corinth grappled with, and it is still a challenge for us now. As the Rt. Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde, the Bishop of Washington, framed it in THAT sermon on Tuesday: "Is true unity among us even possible, and why should we care? I hope we care, because the culture of contempt which has become normalized in this country threatens to destroy us... with God's help, I believe unity is possible, but only if we are willing to tend the foundations on which such unity depends."¹

The Corinthian Church would likely have resonated with the bishop's thinking on this matter. In the early part of the first century, Corinth was a bustling Roman colony. It sits at the crossroads connecting two major regions of Greece, and Greece with Asia Minor (i.e., Ephesus, Rhodes, and Palestine). It was a bit of a melting pot back then. The people who lived and worked there literally came from all over the Roman Empire, and brought every language, religious practice, and cultural assumption you could think of along with them. Paul founded the Christian community there likely in the early 50s CE. Even after he moved on, the people there respected him so much that they kept writing to him to get advice about solving various problems. He would both answer their

¹ The Rt. Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde, "Homily: A Service of Prayer for the Nation." <https://cathedral.org/sermons/homily-a-service-of-prayer-for-the-nation/> [accessed January 22, 2025].

questions and scold them for their bad behavior when he felt it was warranted. There's a lot of scholarly debate over just how many of these letters were actually exchanged, and how many of them have been lost. Paul's overall message in the ones we do have is pretty clear: DO BETTER. And keep your eye on the ball... which is about all of us, together, living Jesus' commandment to love one another.

The result of all of us, together, doing our best to follow Jesus' example, is the building up of the community. At its best, it is able to fully embrace its unity AND its diversity. Individual members can depend on one another to help meet basic needs. And, perhaps most importantly, it is able to stand up with and for all of its neighbors in the face of cruelty and injustice. Many of our leaders, from Bernie Sanders to Bishop Budde, have spoken up publicly about this very necessity over the last several days, and in words which somewhat echo Paul's. It should not seem to be as amazing a thing as the reactions in the mainstream media to THAT sermon are suggesting... and yet, it is a necessary reminder that being a member of the diverse Body of Christ demands living into the Biblical mandate summed up by the prophet Micah: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Such words and actions are a part of who we are – and, what's more, they echo the words and actions of Jesus himself.

It seems like a daunting task when we consider that doing justice and loving mercy have to be done on such a large scale, particularly when it seems like everyone and everything which does not agree with the openly racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic policies of the new administration is under attack. Our commitment to doing justice is rooted in the small things like giving a meal to someone who's hungry, or naming hurtful and hateful speech for what it is when we hear it. They are easily doable.

They are where we can begin to realize how we can go about the enormous and vastly important task of bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor.

This is a very anxious and delicate time. We know to some extent, based on prior experience, that chaos is going to be normal for the foreseeable future. So too will be displays of abject cruelty and stochastic terrorism – that is, speech intended to spur violence – both of which are designed to provoke fear and compliance. Authoritarians count on that to do their damage. To put it in terms of Paul's body metaphor, the goal is to force people to become one member, to the detriment of the whole body. But we don't have to let them do it. "If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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'... But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Cor 12:19-21, 24b-26).