

Inter-Mission

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-7a, 8-10 "Now go home and have a feast. Share your food and wine with those who don't have enough. Today is holy to our Lord, so don't be sad. The joy that the Lord gives you will make you strong." (v. 10)
- 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 As it is, God put every different part in the body just as he wanted it to be. There would not be a body if it were all only one part! ...All of you are Christ's body, and each one is a part of it. (vv. 18-19, 27)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: What each person has to offer is essential for this church to be effective for Christ's sake in the world.

Having just heard the Apostle Paul's familiar description of the church for which he uses the metaphor of a human body, subconsciously we may be wondering:

What's the most important body part?

It depends.

It's a given that without certain body parts, the body itself cannot live. Remove the lungs, heart or kidneys (and other systems and parts), the body ceases to function. Period.

The answer to what's the most important body part, beyond those that keep you alive, varies according to the function required by the inhabitant of the body.

For example, a golfer asks things of his or her body that a farmer doesn't ask. One golfing publication says that the three most important body parts for a golfer are the hips/glutes, the core/pelvis and the [shoulder blades]/upper back. Why are they important? Because they're the key, according to this source, to an effective golf swing. They have the biggest "influence over what a club does."

A concert pianist insures her fingers.

A baseball player needs arm and leg strength, but also great hand-eye coordination.

A surgeon needs a steady hand.

In all these examples, the rest of the body swings into action to serve the primary function required by the inhabitant of the body. So, although a concert pianist is especially fond of her fingers, she's also asking the rest of her body to keep it together. "Hey, do your job, people, because if you don't, these fingers cannot work their magic on that Steinway at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts tomorrow night! Lungs -- No congestion please! I don't want to be coughing through the whole performance. Nose -- please don't be sniffing and running 'cause I can't blow you out with a tissue and play those arpeggios at the same time! Feet -- get me on stage without tripping, please! The rest of you, likewise. Let's pull together and let these fingers knock 'em dead! Thank you very much!"¹

So the body's many parts are all important, in different ways under different circumstances.

We've heard St. Paul's metaphor so often – that the church is to be like a body with many different parts all working together – and yet until this week I didn't realize that we modern readers miss that what Paul was saying was considered revolutionary. In the current issue of *Christian Century* magazine, pastor

¹ from "Different Parts, Same DNA" a Homiletics.com

http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93040940 accessed 1/20/2016

and seminary professor Verity A. Jones² notes that in ancient times the metaphor of a group functioning like the human body was

used to mollify those of the lowest social and political status, reminding them of their duty to serve those who are naturally superior. Paul reverses this interpretation: “The members of the body that seem weaker are indispensable, 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.”³

Now, what does that have to do with Presbyterian Christians gathered in Rocky River, Ohio? Let’s ask ourselves, “In the body of Christ, what is our position? What is our relationship to the rest of the body?”

Our first inclination might be to adopt a stance of modesty, humility: “We are God’s children, God’s humble servants; we are mere followers of Christ—the one sent to show us the way.”

But I don’t think “meek-and-humble-followers” is who we are. We of this congregation are not the less-respectable, inferior parts of the body of Christ. No, I believe Rocky River Presbyterian represents the admired, superior members of the body. I know... that sounds boastful, so un-Christlike. It may make you uncomfortable to hear your church described as a “superior member of the body of Christ.” But follow this. For the most part...

- We are employed, or provided for in our retirement.
- We have stable and often quite comfortable housing.
- We are healthy, and have access to medical care when we’re not.
- We don’t fear for our safety on a daily basis.
- Our families have access to quality public and even private education.
- We know where our next meal is coming from, and it’s not unusual for that to be from a restaurant.
- We have mobility—we have access to personal transportation, and have the means and flexibility to be able to travel.

We certainly don’t want to adopt a boastful attitude, and I really don’t think we flaunt it... but let’s face it: by and large this community of believers has more opportunity, more discretion and freedom, more influence and access, more material wealth than the average congregation. As a statement of fact and not to denigrate anyone else, as a member of the body of Christ this part of the body called Rocky River Presbyterian is in what St. Paul would have considered to be a superior or advantaged position.

But that doesn’t make us better than other churches. According to St. Paul, rather than the weaker, inferior parts of the Christian body having to kowtow to what we think is important, we are called to be sensitive and responsive to those parts of the Christian community who are not in the advantaged position we enjoy where we can call our shots and determine our destiny. As Paul wrote in verse 25, “And so there is no division in the body, but all its different parts have the same concern for one another.”

Being a congregation with some distinct advantages as compared to other congregations, we are called to use our capabilities as leaders by being servants to those who find themselves in the position of needing to be served.

And I have come to realize that we find ourselves right now in a unique time to wrestle with the question famously raised by the Old Testament prophet Micah, the question of “What does the Lord require of us?”⁴

You see, our mission connections have changed a lot in the past year. Let me give you three examples.

² <http://www.cpx.cts.edu/home/people/profile/center-leadership/verity-a.-jones>, accessed 1/21/2016

³ “Living by the Word, Jan. 24, Third Sunday after the Epiphany” by Verity A. Jones. *The Christian Century*, Jan. 20, 2016, Vol. 133, No. 2, p. 18a.

⁴ Micah 6:8

First, our twenty-year partnership with our friends at Faith Presbyterian Church in Lakewood came to an end last month. For many years we joined them in hosting homeless families in their church building as participants in the Interfaith Hospitality Network. About fifteen years ago we also partnered with them in being a location for a monthly free meal as part of Lakewood's Community Meal Program. But on Christmas Eve Faith Presbyterian said their final benediction for their congregation and closed their doors. One consequence of the closing of Faith Church in Lakewood was that one of our most popular and long-standing mission programs was taken away.

A second change in our mission involvement occurred last month. Since 2013 our church has had a sponsoring relationship with two Presbyterian missionaries serving in Egypt's Synod of the Nile. The Reverends Cinda and Steve Gorman had moved from Cincinnati to Cleveland to establish a home closer to their children living here. They did this as part of their preparation for transitioning from being parish pastors to becoming overseas missionaries so that when their term ended, they would come home to their "new home" in Cleveland. The Gormans' three years of service in the Synod of the Nile ended last month when they moved from employment to retirement. Consequently, our relationship with two missionaries we knew by name and by face also ended.

A third factor affecting our congregation's mission involvement is not a "done deal," but there's some uncertainty hovering over it. Our long history of our Presbyterian Women organization staging an annual "Trash & Treasure Sale" is being studied. We've been doing it for decades – if anyone knows precisely when Trash & Treasure actually started, please tell me. It takes a lot of volunteers to make for a successful sale, not just on the day of the sale, but in the months of planning and especially in the two weeks leading up to the sale. Of late we've found it a bit harder each year to line up all the volunteer support necessary to make things run smoothly. Consequently, I know that our Presbyterian Women leadership has had conversations about whether or not we'll be able to continue holding the sale. Losing Trash & Treasure would be regrettable because the result of the sale is always impressive in raising thousands of dollars in one day which "PW" is able to give away to support various mission projects.

So our Community Meal involvement has gone away. Our missionaries have retired. Trash & Treasure is "on" for 2016 but still, it's "on the bubble." Some would see this as a time of despair. Some might say, "Quick, let's find another community meal to dive into. Let's identify other missionaries to plug into."

But I don't think that simply replacing what we've lost is what we're being called to do.

I see this as a time for our church to take another look at our place in the body of Christ. As I pointed out earlier, we have many things going *for* us, many strengths as a community of faith. And now, suspended in this time of transition, we have the opportunity to discern what God might be leading us toward, what God might be calling us to do. Given our congregation's strengths and talents, gifts and skills, we have a chance in the months ahead to consider what opportunity for service exists in the world for which we are uniquely suited. What unmet need is out there that is waiting for a church like ours to come forward? What does a Christian community like ours feel passionate about accomplishing in the name of Jesus Christ?

Already our Session and the Session's Mission group have each begun considering how we might be guided in identifying our new calling to mission. They are exploring what guidance we receive from the Scriptures and from our Reformed Protestant tradition and from our Presbyterian rules and procedures. The Session and its Mission Committee are coming up with ways of engaging you – the congregation – in this process of discerning how we will engage in service and mission. Maybe we'll complete some surveys or polls. Maybe we'll have some study sessions or focus groups. We might have some field trips to see for ourselves what needs are out there. Maybe we'll bring in some people with first-hand experience.

As this congregation celebrates its sixtieth birthday, we're discovering that this is not a time to retire and rest on the laurels of past accomplishments. It's not a time to settle for "business-as-usual," because we need to recognize that the assumptions that the church was built on over the past sixty years aren't as pervasive in the society we live in today:

- people are interested in relating or affiliating with groups but are not as concerned about whether they "belong" to organizations;

- people want to be involved based on what moves them personally, not out of a sense of duty or obligation;
- people are more willing to commit to projects short-term but hesitate to jump into open-ended commitments.

So, when we consider the worldwide church of Jesus Christ, and when we consider the Presbyterian Church (USA), and when we consider you, Rocky River Presbyterian Church, using St. Paul's metaphor of the church as a body, what is the most important part of the body? Like the examples of the concert pianist or the golfer, it's all parts working together to support the main thing.

- We need you the fifty-year member and you the member still in your "rookie year;"
- We need you the life-long church-goer and you who are still wet on your forehead from your baptism.
- We need you the empty-nest homemaker and you the business owner.
- We need you the frazzled mother of little ones and you the student swimming in nightly homework.

This is directed to "you": what you have to offer is essential for this church to be effective for Christ's sake in the world.