

The Church Embodied
Sunday, January 27, 2019
1 Corinthians 12: 12 – 31

Thursday night after dinner, Mia wanted to watch one cartoon before the bedtime routine began. Justin and I took advantage of the opportunity to have a grown-up conversation. Neither of us realized that Mia was paying any attention to us. I started explaining how frustrated I was that I hadn't finished the sermon and I was going to have to work on it more on Friday, and probably Saturday, too. Being a typical extrovert, I realized I just needed to try to talk it out before I could really solidify my ideas. So, I gabbed on about bodies and how we need all the parts to be working together in effortless harmony. I wrestled with a few possible illustrations and academic points that might support my case. Nothing seemed to fully capture the complexity of the analogy of the church as body. Without any resolution, the cartoon ended and Justin went to do bedtime while I cleaned up the kitchen. Twenty minutes later, Justin emerged from Mia's room chuckling because at some point during the routine, Mia pulled a Lego-man out to play. "Look Daddy", she said with excitement, "his head comes apart from his body, why doesn't mommy preach about him on Sunday?" Apparently, all of this body talk got her thinking!

The Lego-man is actually the perfect antithesis to what Paul is suggesting when he presents the idea of the church as the body of Christ. The Lego-man reality is more like that of the storm troopers in *Star Wars*.

There's this incredible scene where an army of storm troopers are marching in perfect synchronicity.

They are all clad in white armor,
behind which one is indistinguishable from the next.
They are without face, without blemish,
and without any sort of identity.
Each offers the same thing to the dark side:
brutal, unchecked power and loyalty.
They move with efficiency toward their mission:
squash the rebellion.
When their leader, Darth Vader, walks in
the army separates in half
with a perfectly straight pathway cleared in the middle.

Although Paul, the author of today's scripture reading unfortunately did not live long enough to see *The Empire Strikes Back*, the mechanical synchronicity of the dark side certainly could have described that of the Roman empire that Paul knew so well.

Biblical scholars date the letter we know as 1 Corinthians to 48 CE (which is another way of saying AD). This would date the letter to only a few years after being colonized by Rome. When Rome came in, they brought freed slaves and others who would have been considered "lower class" to populate the city.

So, when Paul begins to build the church in Corinth, he starts with people who would not have been valued or welcomed contributors to the Roman empire.

This is where the body analogy gets interesting! Paul and his contemporaries would have known the body as a commonly used analogy to describe, defend, and reinforce the Roman way.

In the writings of Cicero, Seneca, Dio Chrysostom and other ancient authors, the idea of the body is used to promote social unity by maintaining existing property rights and social relations[1].

In other words, thought leaders in Paul's day used the analogy of the body to reinforce socio-political hierarchies – arguing that things were set up as they should be, that all was well, and no one should upset the natural order.

By Roman logic, nature had blessed some people with the right kind of bodies...bodies that exuded power and privilege. These bodies were rightly in positions of authority. And as for the others, those who were not so lucky, well... they should just accept their position, make peace with it, and move on. In the body of Rome, Caesar was head. Caesar commanded the rest of the body and he was without question, the most valuable piece of the body. The rest of the pieces – arms, hands, heart, eyes, etc – Had a secondary and more supportive role to play. They were always at the command of Caesar. And they always knew their value in relation to the other parts. In the body of Rome, social, economic, and political life ran like a well-oiled machine, with effortless synchronicity.

So, when Paul uses the image of the body with the Corinthians, there is no big surprise here. ...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?... God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as God chose...

But as the letter goes on, we start to notice that Paul is changing some key details. 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. On the contrary the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable...and those members that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this...This is cultural blasphemy! You see, in the body of Rome, parts are as replaceable as they are with the Lego-man and the storm trooper army. If the torso becomes disconnected or a supporting part breaks, it can easily be swapped out for another one that looks exactly the same. But what Paul is saying is that in the body of God all parts are needed, all are indispensable.

In just a few sentences Paul has undermined the entire social structure upon which the Roman Empire is built! And he does so using their metaphor.

I love the storm trooper scene from *Star Wars* because it provides such a beautiful contrast with the resistance... in the very next scene we see the rebel army. They are not marching or even lining up.

They are not wearing uniforms that conceal their individuality, no. They are scattered irregularly throughout the screen. They are wearing different clothes. They are male,

female, human, and non-human. They have different hairstyles and skin colors and they are discussing their plans, disagreeing on some points and working together to determine the way forward. In some ways I think George Lucas really understood the difference between the body of Rome and the body of God.

The body of Rome says that bodies look and act in certain ways, that they think alike, and that one is easily replaced by another. The body of Rome is quick to exclude and discount those who don't fit in quite as easily. And those who might not be Rome's first pick, well, they can go to Corinth.

You and I know that human bodies are always more complicated than the Lego man, the army of storm troopers, and the body of Rome. We can try to cover ourselves with armor but we will never be impermeable. We may like to believe we are strong, but we will never be unbreakable. We can eat healthy food, workout every day, take our vitamins, study our lessons, work 60-hour weeks to succeed at our jobs but the truth of the matter is we will never be good enough for the body of Rome. We are no match for the storm trooper army. But here, in these ancient words from Paul we find a timeless truth. We may not be enough for the body of Rome but we are more than enough for the Body of God. In fact, the body of God – which is the church – is incomplete without us. Not incomplete like the Lego-man waiting for any one of a million possible torsos but incomplete like a mosaic that is missing a part so unique, there is only one match in all the world. It doesn't matter if the edges are jagged, or if it was broken once upon a time, no it is exactly the right shape now, for the space that the Creator held open, waiting to bring it back into the fold.

Last week in worship everyone was invited to consider their spiritual gifts and to consider how we might offer those to God. You may have noticed the cover art for your worship guides today is a photograph of these gifts arranged on a table. Those in the inner circle have writing on them. These are the gifts we know we have to offer to the body of God. The circle on the outside consists of empty shapes, these represent those gifts which are not yet known to us, those we will discover along the way. During the week, I spent some time reading the gifts that you identified and praying that God might embolden you to offer them in this community. You named things like:

Music, Hospitality, Teaching, Finance, Art, Loyalty, Patience, Encouragement, Leadership, Friendship, Planning, Patience, Love, Compassion, Sociability, Energy, Friendliness, Gardening, Working with Children & Families, Humor, Sewing, Arranging Flowers, Creativity, Prayer, Listening, Healing, Discernment, Intellect, Athleticism, Building things, Helping, Optimism, Playing an instrument, Dance, and so much more!

I love the creativity and vulnerability that you all modeled as you wrote down your gifts. For many of us even naming our gifts is a courageous act. Maybe we've offered them before and been shut out, told we weren't needed. Or maybe we have known that we have a gift that others have yet to recognize. No matter who we are or what we do, naming our gifts and offering them to others is scary – especially when we don't know what the end result will be. But last week you did it. And look at what came of it (*referencing church window artwork on display in the Sanctuary*).

When we all offer our gifts, Greystone Baptist becomes the body of Christ.

- Differently shaped edges reflect our different gifts
- Gaps between - Sometimes the space between what I offer and what you offer is uneven (we may not always see how each compliments the other) I like to think that's where the Spirit comes in to draw us together, to connect us and to turn a bunch of differently colored shapes into something as beautiful as Greystone Baptist.

In the same way Greystone is one small part of the larger body of Christ in the world. We are a unique, valuable, and irreplaceable part that God is shaping and cultivating now. We may not know just how all the pieces fit together. We may not be able to predict what may come of the sharing of our gifts. But we can rest assured that God has created us and God has given us all that we need to be the body of Christ. So, the question is, will we rise to the challenge? Will we generously and vulnerably offer our gifts, not knowing how they might match up with others to animate the body of Christ? Will we be a church that moves effortlessly and confidently into the world because we welcome and value everyone's gifts? Will we empower each other to use these precious gifts for the sake of the whole body? Will we share ourselves fully and faithfully so that we might be the body of God? Will we become the church embodied?

Benediction:

(Adapted from William Sloan Coffin and H. Stephen Shoemaker)

May God bless you and keep you,
May God give you the grace never to sell yourself short;
Grace to risk something big for something good; and
Grace to remember the world is now
too dangerous for anything but the truth and
too small for anything but love.

So, may God take your feet and move through them
May God take your hands and work with them
And may God take your hearts and set them on fire
Amen.