



Stitched Together

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Rev. Thomas G. James

Roberts Memorial / Washington Street UMC

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I'm not sure I can adequately express the holy reverence I have for this moment. Some 190 years ago, the Methodist witness in what was then *not* Old Town, but just the town of Alexandria, was singular. That's not to say we were all of one mind, but there was only one place for the Methodist Episcopal Church to gather for worship – at Trinity Church (at least, that's what the history books say).

The history books then say that the sin of humanity won out over the witness of God's love in this community. The history books say that division took place at multiple times and for a multitude of reasons. The history books, and the underlying realities, say the Methodist witness in Alexandria was divided as a necessity for safety – as a necessity for protection – as a desire for power – and as a desire to maintain sinful human institutions.

I would be lying to myself and to you all if I tried to claim that we are past the days of such sinful division. I can say, without hesitation, that even in the gathered witness of the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church in Roanoke a week and a half ago that the sinfulness of institutional and systemic racism is very much present and still warring against the good of God in the Church and in our communities. For as many years have passed since the wake of our nation's original sin, our journey toward the promised land is far from over.

And so I do not take this moment lightly. What we are doing here today – what we did back on Holy Thursday with Beulah and Downtown Baptist – gathering as a historic Black Methodist church, and as a historic Methodist South church in worship together – this is not a witness that we should glance past. Such a gathering is not to be overlooked. Robert's - your willingness to offer the pulpit of your church to the pastor of Washington Street is not an olive branch that goes unobserved. Thank you for extending what, for over two centuries, has been denied to you.

Truly this gathering is not just a witness to God's grace in Old Town, here in Alexandria. Friends, this is a witness of something that is greater than you or I; our gathering in worship together is a witness to what God is doing in the world, of work God is calling us to be a part of as a witness of who God has created us to be. And I believe God has a faithful word for us in such a moment of significance.

Last week as I was mulling over this passage in 1 Corinthians 12, I came across this story of a city work team planting trees. As the story goes, a bright yellow highway department truck crept along a city street. A worker slowly climbed out of the truck and laboriously dug a large hole between the sidewalk and the street. A few minutes later, a second worker got out, filled the hole and tamped down the dirt. A few yards down the street, they repeated the procedure, then again and again. An elderly lady was watching. Finally, she walked over to the workers and asked, "What in the world are you doing?" One

of the workers said, “We’re on an urban beautification project.” “Beautification?” she asked in dismay. “What’s so beautiful about all those filled in holes?” “Well, you see,” said the worker, “the man who plants the trees is out sick today.”

There’s little question that things just aren’t quite right when people are missing. For example, Pastor Daniely is on a well-deserved vacation today, and while you’ve got a preacher present, I will be the first to tell you, I am not JD. Save the coincidental shared name of James, you will find things will be different without his presence. For starters, I don’t get out from behind the pulpit – I will not be walking the aisle; and ... well ... I didn’t grow up in the black church tradition – so while you’re welcome to call out, don’t expect me to know how to respond like Rev. Daniely.

I venture to guess that you understand what I mean when I say things just aren’t the same when everyone’s not at the table. Whether it’s the absence of mom’s coffee cake on the breakfast table when you’re not home on Christmas day, or the lack of the music playing in the background at the family homestead when the family pianist is missing, or the added work on your desk because your co-worker was let go, or the lack of the jubilant and infectious smile of those who are home and infirmed ... things just aren’t the same when people are missing from the table.

It should not surprise us when we find ourselves missing those who are absent from the table, nor when we find ourselves yearning to be with the community. Mourning the absence of the other, or mourning our own absence, is innate in our being. We were not created to live in isolation, but instead, we were gifted and called to be part of something – part of a family – part of a community that is greater than our individual selves. As the triune God is our example, we are as God’s created – made in the image of God – designed to be in community with one another.

There is no Biblical witness that claims we are sufficient in and of ourselves. There is no Biblical story that offers that our call is to isolation. There is no example in the Scriptural text of someone seeking solitude that God endorses, except for a few individual retreat stories where God leads someone to the wilderness for a *short* time of rejuvenation, wherein they are re-filled with faith and energy and sent back to the community as a witness for God.

This is what it means to be part of the Church – part of the community of faith – part of the body of Christ. It’s a reality we cannot escape. ... I like how Rev. Dr. Raewynn Whiteley says it as she offers, “We come to the waters of baptism as individuals, independent and relatively self-contained. We come out of the water changed. Our identity is no longer solitary; we can no longer truly be known without reference to the community into which we have been incorporated: the body of Christ, the church.” She continues, “After baptism, we are more than just ourselves; we are by definition, beings-in-relationship.”ⁱ

This is the joy of baptism. Baptism incorporates us into a greater entity than ourselves. We are given the gift of belonging at baptism – belonging to this greater body – this greater entity – this greater community. This one, holy, apostolic, catholic, and universal body that is *the Church*. As we read 1 Corinthians 12, we must acknowledge that for Paul, as he is writing this letter to the church at Corinth, our incorporation into the Church through baptism defined a few fundamental truths he believed

about what it meant to be a part of the Church. This text will only make sense if we understand Paul's belief, because that is what influences his writing.

Paul believed in these two fundamental truths: first, when we are initiated into the community, we are called to take our place. We are called to bring with us every bit of who we are, the good, the bad, and the ugly, and to give ourselves as active and engaged members of the body. And second, we are called to incorporate others. We are called to incorporate every bit of who the other is, the good, the bad, and the ugly, and to welcome the other as an active and engaged member of the body. These two fundamental truths are the foundation for what Paul has to offer in 1 Corinthians 12.

Here in this text, Paul uses this *body* metaphor to describe the Church. Only, as Paul is using this metaphor, he was using the imagery of the body in a very counter-cultural way. Now, when I say counter-cultural, I don't mean counter to 21st Century culture, I mean counter to First Century culture. If you look at other philosophical writings of the time, the body was used metaphorically to define a very hierarchical structure, and to give credence to the idea that some parts of the body were indeed more important than others.

For example, around 500 BC, Menenius Agrippa, who was a consul of the Roman Republic, told the [Roman] soldiers a fable about the parts of the human body and how each part had its own purpose in the greater function of the body. As the fable goes, the rest of the body thought the stomach was getting a free ride, and together, the extremities of the body decided to stop nourishing the stomach. The hands would not prepare the food, the mouth would not eat the food, etc. Soon, with no food reaching the stomach, the whole body became fatigued and was unable to function. The rest of the body realized that the stomach served a very important purpose, and that without the stomach, they were nothing.

As the fable was told by the Roman consul, the stomach represented the patricians – the wealthy class who were seen as doing nothing but enjoying the fruits of everyone else's labor. The other parts of the body, the parts doing the physical labor – growing the food, preparing the food, etc. – these other parts represented the plebs, the lower class of society. In this way, the image – the metaphor – of the body was used to explain why it was the wealthy class, represented by the stomach, was so vital to the body, and why the lower class, the extremities, needed to continue to feed the fruit of their labor to the stomach. ... Sound familiar? I imagine that story has been used a few times in our own American history. ... Perhaps today, we'd call this fable trickle-down economics. Feed the wealthy, and you'll get your just reward.

"It is precisely this sort of class system of ranking denoted by the "wisdom of the world" that the message of a crucified messiah upended."ⁱⁱ It is this very image of the body – this corrupted image – that Paul was writing against, not by finding a new metaphor, but by correcting the metaphor that had been degraded for the personal gain of the ruling class. Even in those early years of the church, the corrupted image of the body had taken root within the church, and there was a delineation taking form, where some claimed their gifts – their presence – their knowledge – their abilities were better than others.

Paul is writing to the church in Corinth to correct their misunderstanding of what it means to be a part of the church. He is refuting the idea that some are better than others because of the gifts they bring to the table. Paul uses the image [of the body] to emphasize the importance of the seemingly less important, less prominent, or less significant parts.ⁱⁱⁱ “[Paul] employs the analogy not to keep subordinates in their places but to urge more privileged members of the community to respect and value the contributions of those members who appear to be their inferiors, both in social status and in spiritual potency.”^{iv}

Hear Paul’s words: “If the foot were to say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that does not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? 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.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker, are indispensable, and those members of the body we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect.” Paul is defining the church – the body of Christ – by saying there is no one who is unworthy and unneeded in the body.

Church, can we just be honest and name that this is not how we have given witness to the body of Christ over the history of our witness to Christ in Alexandria? Can we humble ourselves enough to admit, that whether in our local congregation, in our local community, or in our global denomination, we have not upheld this image as Paul describes it?

See, from my reading of this text, what Paul seems to be saying is that there is no unity in the body if there is no diversity. If we try to create a church of all hands, we are not a church – we are but a lacking function *of* the Church. If we try to create a church of all eyes, we are not a church – we are but a lacking function *of* the church. If we try to create a church of all stomachs, we are not a church – we are but a lacking function *of* the church. The reality is, that we are only a faithful witness of the Church, at least as Paul describes it, when we are filled with the diversity of parts needed to live into the *fullness* of what God has created.

Paul defines this unity in diversity in Galatians 3:28, when he writes, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Paul is saying that we are only a true witness to God in Christ – we are only a faithful witness to who we have been created to be as the Church – when we are all of the one Body.

Now I do want to pause, because I know this passage in Galatians has been littered throughout Christian history as a troubling text. Let’s begin with what Paul is *not* saying. Paul is *not* saying that your maleness, or your femaleness, or your Jewishness, or your Greekness, or your blackness, or your whiteness, is not important. Paul is not trying to *wash* away your individuality in the imagery of the body of Christ. Paul is not trying to rid the body of its diversity. What Paul is trying to say is that your distinctions do not alienate you from the body. These differentiations do not exclude you from the community of faith, but instead, they become part of the tapestry that is the body of Christ.

Just as in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul is not telling us all to become hands, or feet, or eyes, or anything else – Paul makes it perfectly clear, each is a necessity in the body – in Galatians, Paul is not saying that our individuality does not make us a part of the body, what Paul is saying is that when we are a faithful witness of the body, what people will see is not our distinctions, but our shared glory in Christ. “The body is internally differentiated in accordance with the design of God; without such differentiation, the body would be grotesque and helpless, all eye or all ear.”^v But, when we are faithfully diverse – when we are unified in our diversity – we are a beautiful sight of God’s love exemplified in our being – our singular, unified, being.

Our singular, unified, diverse, being that is a faithful witness to God’s love in Jesus Christ.

Our call is not to wash away our differences. There will always be differences within the body of Christ: differing opinions, experiences, priorities, and needs. ... Our call as a body of Christ is not to down play these differences for some superficial harmony. We are not called to be the same, we are called to be one.

In the history of our church, we have failed to maintain that oneness. Even today, across the denomination, we are failing to maintain that oneness. We have rebelled against God’s love, we have broken God’s law, and we have failed to be an obedient church. I know the history of Washington Street United Methodist – our history books don’t hide much. I know there was a time a when our leaders believed in maintaining power more than they believed in maintaining a Biblical witness of Christian unity amidst diversity. That power struggle continues today – locally, nationally, and globally in our church.

I know that in Alexandria, the body of Christ, the diverse tapestry that represents the body of Christ, was torn apart. Limb from limb, we ripped and tore until we separated. We formed a different house for the hands, for the head, for the feet, and for the eyes and ears. And while each has maintained a limited witness of God’s will in the world, we have failed to live fully into the body of Christ because we have not done the work together as we were created to do.

But there’s good news in the love of God in Jesus Christ. By grace, we are being stitched back together. In God’s continual work in the world, we are being sewn back as one body. The divided body is being woven together by God’s continual presence. In our humility before God and one another, we are being re-formed into the image of Christ where in there is no east or west, no Jew or Greek, no black or white – but in the presence of a divided body, we are being sewn together as a tapestry of beauty that represents the fullness of our individuality *and* the fullness of God’s love for humanity.

Re-forming, re-creation, re-birth, re-newal ... this work is not easy work. It’s hard to image a world with no war, no competition, no division, and no sorrow. For us, it might even be unimaginable. But, this is exactly the body God has created in Christ. This is exactly the body empowered by God with the Spirit. This is the beauty of humanity formed by God in creation.

This is the image of creation we pray for weekly – “*Thy* kingdom come, *thy* will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Friends, siblings, Church ... look around. God is at work, and we are being sewn into the

body, formed into the Church, called into a more perfect way. I am humbled to be present with you in this space, and excited – energized – empowered – for the work of God in our community. And I pray, may God continue to stitch us together, one service at a time, one prayer at a time, one Bible study at a time, one kickball game at a time, that we may be a vision for the body of Christ as we represent the full glory of the kingdom of God.

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Raewynn Whiteley. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C, Volume 1*. Eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Ray Pickett. *The Politics of the Messianic Body*. Politicaltheology.com. Retrieved June 25, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ Troy Miller. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C, Volume 1*. Eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

^{iv} Richard B. Hays. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: First Corinthians*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

^v Ibid.