

SERMON- Epiphany 3 (C)

Charles R. Cowherd

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Good Shepherd

January 23, 2022

Psalm 19 ~~(not 26)~~

Luke 4:14-21

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.¹

*I speak to you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
AMEN.*

OPENING:

“Have it your way” says *Burger King*.

“Just do it” according to *Nike*

“What’s in your wallet?” asks *Capital One*.

“You do you.” “Speak your truth.”

These are the phrases of modern advertising and of American individualism.

Against those, in our Corinthians reading, Paul offers this remarkable counterargument of what the *Body of Christ* looks like.

But, before we get to reading itself, I want to introduce another piece of evidence, on Paul’s behalf, let’s call it ‘Exhibit A’ for the Apostle Paul as he makes his case to the Corinthians and to us.

BODY STRINGS

These are “Body Strings”—

These strings were each originally part of a long spool of rope purchased from a camping store in the Shenandoah Valley in the 1990s.

That long spool of rope made its way to Shrine Mont, the Diocese of Virginia’s Camps and Conference Center, where it was used to demonstrate Paul’s remarkable metaphor of the Body of Christ.

The way it worked was this: from that long piece of rope, individual bracelets were cut and given to each camper, like myself, at the start of the session.

These “body strings” were then worn around your wrist throughout your time at camp, symbolizing your membership in the Camp Body, in the Body of Christ. Everyone’s string was a little different, some shorter, some longer, some a little frayed here or there, but they all came from the same source.

¹ 1st Corinthians 12.12

You lived and breathed the Body passage for a couple weeks. You learned to work together as a unit, to rejoice together, to suffer together, and to know who you were as individual parts of the body and as a part of this interconnected entity that transcended yourself.

As camp came to a close, all the strings (many parts) would be collected, and tied back together into one big, long necklace worn around the neck (one Body). And an end was left untied, meaning that the Body of Christ is always open to others, that it's never closed off to more.

At Camp's final service, you get one of the strings back, but not your own. You carry that string home with you into the Valley of the World. It remains a reminder of your connectedness to the entire spool, and also of the call to be Christ's body, to be Christ's hands and feet and eyes and ears of the world.

BODY OF CHRIST

This is my favorite piece of scripture in all of the Bible, it's definitely the one that has had more influence on my life than any other.

It brings back memories of campfires, and guitar songs, and summer days of fun. It also calls to mind the most powerful example of living and being in a Christian community that I have ever experienced, of being the Body of Christ, of taking Scripture and making it into a reality.

So.... "Exhibit A"... and again consider it evidence, alongside 1st Corinthians 12:12-31, against how *we* often define ourselves: by nationality, or by our political affiliation, or by denomination, or by socio-economic class.

Against that, Paul says.... God says: "you are because I made you, you are because of your connection to one another. You are wonderfully and fearfully made, as pathetic as a frayed piece of rope, but precious in my eyes."

In the language of Camp, when God looks upon the individual, on the one string, God sees you connected to the vastness of creation, connected to the Body of Christ. Likewise, when God sees the totality of creation, all the strings tied together, God is still able to see you, that one particular unique/ valuable but broken string.

I love this passage. I worry, probably too much, that my memories of this passage, of these strings, is nostalgia, it's "campy"—too sentimental.

REFLECTIONS

So here are a few reflections on this passage from my perspective today, having come down from the mountain, preaching on it as an adult, and as a priest.

1) The first comes from the perspective of being home all week in quarantine with a 4-year-old.

If you want to consider this passage more deeply, watch the movie *Encanto*.

I did, about 10 times over the past ten days.

It's Paul's Body Passage translated to a Disney musical set in Columbia.

It talks about gifts, it talks about sharing each other's pain, it talks about being a part of a group. It talks about what it means to be an individual, but also being a part of a family.

(And I know I started the sermon decrying American consumerism and marketing, but now I am saying, declaring unequivocally, watch this Disney movie.)

2) The second follows that one. Paul's message in Corinthians is so easily translated into other media and into other cultures because it is so universal. It works at a camp in the Shenandoah Valley, it works in a Columbian family with an enchanted house in an animated movie. It can work in sports, or in a business and elsewhere.

Paul did not come up with it, he got it from the common philosophical and literary environment of Greek and Roman culture. At first, people would have been nodding their heads when they heard it for the first time.

The hard part, what makes it such a livewire, is what he says about the weakest members of the Body, the less honorable. *That* part would have been alien to the Corinthian community. He says, it's your job to take care of them. You suffer when they suffer. In Stoicism, it's the opposite, you are supposed to suffer in silence, and not to share it.

One time, at camp, we were on this rock-climbing trip and it was really hot and the packs were heavy, and one of the campers, a strong young man very proud of himself, made the point as we were schlepping all the gear this way and that, that next time we need to make sure that everyone needs to be able to carry their own pack and gear before they come.

Whoops, we needed to go back and cover the whole Body Passage thing again.

With Christ's body, you are all connected, some might even say by a string.

One of the additional metaphors we would use would be Christmas tree lights. You know, old school Christmas tree lights, where if one went out, they all went out.

That's what Christ's body is like, in the sense of its connection to every part of it and how you need every part to shine.

3) That's an impossible standard, almost, unlike a shepherd leaving the 99 to go after the one.

That leads me to my final reflection: that all of this is really hard.

It was hard being the Body of Christ, on the side of a mountain where it's only 2 weeks and where all your meals are provided for you everyone is the same age and religious denomination, and is mostly the same skin color and income-bracket, etc.

It's much harder here in the real world, I think everyone would agree.

CONCLUSION

Paul has something to say about that also, he teases it here at the end of our passage. He knows that it's hard to work together as a unit, that the human body itself does not always work together flawlessly.

He knows that that there needs to be something binding all those sinews and tissues and organs and bones together.

Call this Exhibit B. Paul has something in his back pocket, he has a closing argument *par excellence*.

The lectionary cuts it off, you get 31a but not 31b. It reads:

“Let me show you a more excellent way.”

You will hear the rest next week, the granddaddy of them all:

“Love is patient, love is kind, love never ends. Faith hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is love...”

AMEN