

## Sermon: Battered, Bruised, Broken Yet Honoured

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, January 26, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Did you know that human body has 206 bones, 639 muscles, and about 3 kg of skin, along with cartilages, ligaments, arteries, veins, and blood (not to mention water). Everything time we move, run, jump, or even take a breath, hundreds of different parts of our bodies work together, with our minds, as a cohesive whole.

I am not even talking about Olympic athletes achieving incredible feats, or trained ballet dancers wowing us with their artistry. I am talking about average Joe, like you and I, going about our daily lives, doing daily things.

Even the simplest movement of our bodies, the intricacy of how everything comes together, far exceeds anything that the greatest engineers could possibly dream to achieve in mechanical form. There simply is no comparison! The human body represents one of the most complex systems in existence, in the entire creation.

Thus the Apostle Paul used it as a metaphor, in today Lectionary passage of 1 Corinthians 12, in verse 12,

*“For just as the body is one and has many members,  
and all the members of the body, though many, are one body.”*

The comparison of a physical body to a human community was certainly not original with Paul. Such usage enjoyed a long history in classical literature, but, Paul gives it a brand new twist.

Previously, the hierarchical nature of the body was emphasized. After all, the brain makes all the crucial decisions, and is far more critical than the lowly organs and extremities that sustain routine daily functioning. To be honest, there are probably a few pieces of the human body one could live without—here I am thinking of the pinky toes or the ear lobes (not the whole ear, just the lower part).

Such hierarchical emphasis of the body suggests that the lowly workers, farmers and cannon fodder should simply obey and support their

mercantile, military and political leaders. Those at the bottom of the litter should just stay put and be grateful for the guidance and protection of their obvious natural superiors—survival of the fittest, isn't it?

However, Paul begs to differ. The Apostle highlighted the interconnectedness of all parts of the body, as starting in verse 15,

*“If the foot would say,  
“Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,”  
that would not make it any less a part of the body.  
And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye,  
I do not belong to the body,”  
that would not make it any less a part of the body.”*

More than interconnected, Paul stressed about the indispensability of every part of the body, as in verse 21,

*“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.”*

A human community built on the twin principles of interconnectedness of all parts and indispensability of every part would ensure the full participation of all participants. It would already be far more egalitarian than most forms of society over the history of humanity. A society where workers' input whether blue or white collared are valued and rewarded equally. A society where a government truly exists of the people, by the people and for the people. A society where one is not judged by the colour of one's skin but by the content of one's character. A society where visions and dreams are made of.

However, Paul was not satisfied, he pushed it one step further, by introducing the principle of lifting up and honouring the “least” of the members, as in verse 22-23,

*“The members of the body that seem to be weaker  
are indispensable,  
and those members of the body that we think less honourable  
we clothe with greater honour,  
and our less respectable members are treated  
with greater respect.”*

And where does Paul think such a reversal of worldly order, such absurdity could actually become a reality? In the Church, which he calls it 'the body of Christ'.

The first church fathers accepted the orthodoxy of the incarnation, of God becoming human, but they seem to struggle with its fleshy implications —the mother's womb, the birth and the afterbirth. Yes God gets a body, yet in a bodily form with bodily concerns such as bacteria, hormones and defects, genetic or otherwise.

We see Tertullian insisted that God became fully human, yet he recounted the details with much distain. This is what he had said on the flesh of Christ: "Beginning with the nativity itself," here I quote, "the uncleanness of the generative elements within the womb, the filthy concretion of fluid and blood, of the growth of the flesh for nine months long, out of that very mire...the womb."

Unlike Tertullian, I am not offended by the womb. I am not disturbed by the flesh of Christ nor the physicality of his birth. I am however taken aback by the point that Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 12, comparing the body of Christ somehow to the Church. The Church, seriously?

How about the mire of patriarchal muck the church was born from? What about the filthy concretions of empires, crusades, and colonialism —of which the legacy of residential schools haunts us still? What about the uncleanness of the prosperity gospel, the endless squabbling between the liberals and conservatives, and don't get me started on the unholy alliance between the U.S. Evangelicals and toxic political masculinity. Cut them off from the Church universal, I say, and I won't even bat a eye. But Paul says otherwise. He says, as in verse 24,

*"But God has so arranged the body,  
giving the greater honour to the inferior member."*

Who are the inferior members, one might be tempted to ask? It's the same sort of question that a teacher of the Law once asked of Jesus: "Who are my neighbours?" The answer does get a bit complicated, as the concept of superiority or inferiority is somewhat subjective, requiring a careful analysis of power dynamics, which is beyond the scope of today's sermon. However, the point that Paul is trying to make, as he continues in verse 25, is that

“there may be no dissension within the body,  
but the members may have the same care for one another.”

In the body of Christ, there are many parts: parts I like—those actively serving, contributing to the flourishing of congregations; parts I tolerate—those skeptics, those of little faith yet faith non-the-less; and there are also parts I have no patience for—those whom I do not get along with, and those who openly oppose meaningful ministries, or call in question of the Church’s self-identity.

The Apostle Paul says God has so arranged, and has chosen them all—God has chosen us all—in ways that gives more honour to those who are battered, bruised and broken. Just as God has chosen what is foolish, what is weak in the world, to shame the wise, God chooses what is lowly and despised to be honoured, so that the love of God can shine.

The unity of the body of Christ is not predicated on agreement in doctrinal understanding, nor on the gathering of the like minded individuals. The unity of the body of Christ is entirely predicated on the one Spirit at work, inside each of us and inside all of us—ie. the Church.

This unity is quite diverse, colourful, and complicated. Maintaining such unity does require a bit of work and whole lot of empathy from us all, so that as Paul describes it, in the concluding verse,

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it;  
if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.”

(Testimonial about Grace Presbyterian Church in Orlean)

In the season of Epiphany, the Church universal is called to shine its light onto the world. But the light of the Church is far from the light of Christ. One pastor compares it to a neon sign, with half of its letters burnt out, and the rest blinking, lurching in the wind: “hurch...urch...hurch...urch.” It is battered, bruised and broken, but still giving off its light with its witness to the world, of our need, our collective and individual needs for the grace of God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**