

January 24, 2010: GIFTS GOOD FOR THE GOOSE

1 Corinthians 12-12-31; Psalm 19

Springwater Presbyterian Church -- Eileen Parfrey

If you think I have a knack for taking a metaphor and running it into the ground until it doesn't twitch anymore, take a look at what the church has done with the Apostle Paul's body metaphor. This metaphor has been around the block so many times, the frequent flyer miles it has earned, could take us all to Europe. This metaphor is such an old geezer, we could use its beard at Timberline as a ski run. This metaphor has been in so many sermons in so many places, it's got its own area code. And yet, I have the nerve to preach from it the day of Springwater's annual congregational meeting. Isn't it bad enough to have the annual meeting? Why bring up this old war horse? Well, annual meetings should not be boring, and this text might still have something to say to us.

For instance, I ran across a blog about a church that resonated so negatively with Paul's body metaphor that they organized themselves as *dismembers*.¹ The church was 15 years old and had very traditional worship services, but so many of their cadre was so disaffected with organized religion, that they'd never had "members" until they became part of a denomination that required some form of membership. It was the "who's in and who's out" mindset of membership that got to them. They liked the idea of *dismembership*, because (the pastor writes), "The community gathered around the gospel is always dismantling" the culture's practice of power. They defined themselves with "dis-" words—*disciples* and *dissenters*, engaged in disrupting, disturbing, disarming. Where they ran into trouble was in putting together a *dismembership* campaign. The graphic got just a little too *graphic*, and they sidetracked themselves musing about the parts of the body of Christ they liked and disliked. The pastor's blog records that they like the brain and the ears and the eyes, "But do we really need the testosterone? The loudmouths? The aggressive superegos? If I want to believe in the radical implications of the incarnation, if I want to resist my Gnostic [anti-body, pro-spirit] impulses, I'm going to need some of that love Paul talks about [in the next chapter]."

But today we're talking about body. Can we really dismember the body? Is that up to us? If you remember [the book and movie] *Lord of the Rings*, you'll remember the hobbit Frodo accepts the call to destroy the Ring, in which resides the power to corrupt and destroy all of Middle Earth. Frodo's call involves a long, dangerous journey, from which in all likelihood he will not return alive. He is joined by many companions, some attractive, others creepy, all of whom have unique contributions to make to this gargantuan task, because Frodo can neither carry the Ring nor destroy it alone. It's an epic undertaking, requiring the efforts of literally hundreds of characters, little and insignificant as well as those of mythic proportions. It is only the Ring that both holds them all together and pulls them all apart. Great metaphor for our endeavors as "church."

¹ Debbie Blue, Blogging Toward Sunday: Dismembership, 1/18/10 (*Christian Century Theolog*)

As church members and *dismembers*, we know in our heart of hearts that there are many forces that both hold us together and pull us apart. What I have always loved about this congregation is the corporate commitment to that notion of “the good of the whole.” Amazingly, the thing that makes this work, what I brag to my colleagues about, is that this commitment is from a congregation comprised of “one of everything.” We are not a monolithic, homogeneous group of people. As a congregation, we cover the whole spectrum, theologically and politically. And since time immemorial, this has been a congregation willing to accept that about each other. It’s true there are topics we avoid like the plague. Some things we just won’t discuss. I don’t think this is totally about our membership in the Order of Egypt—you know, De-Nile. There is a gracious willingness to let others hold their own opinions, even if they differ from ours. You don’t always see that in congregations. We live in a culture in which talking heads shout at each other on television in the name of “public discourse.” In many congregations, unless your opinion complies with that of the majority, you are considered either a) wrong-headed, b) in need of more instruction, or c) just plain going to hell. I don’t see this at Springwater. Here, there is a fundamental respect for the *whole* body. It’s as if by agreeing to the meaning and purpose of life together, we are able to bridge a world of gaps. Supporting fellow believers in life together means a willingness to forgo proving your point or making sure everyone else toes the line.

It is a confusing trick of the English language, that the Apostle Paul’s body metaphor for the Church uses the same word to denote body parts as we use to denote our voluntary association with each other—member. His metaphor is a little more radical than our “who’s in and who’s out”—who can vote and who can hold office² Paul is concerned for a conjoining with one another in a way that *needs* our differences *in order* to find unity. When we expect from each other a *conformity* that does not celebrate our differences, we may as well endorse dismemberment, because that means we have cut ourselves off from our source of life, from the One who created us in wonderful, beautiful, extravagant diversity. How can we “live out fully our callings when we are not able to rely on and give support to others to live out theirs?”³ Even when our callings aren’t exactly identical. In *Lord of the Rings*, you will remember that repulsive, insignificant Gollum was just as critical to the accomplishment of Frodo’s task as was beautiful, heroic Aragorn. It’s a matter of whom we trust. If Holy Spirit gives differing gifts, it must be for a purpose. God’s purpose. It is incumbent upon us, then, to celebrate our differences *because of* our unity. Otherwise there will be no unity.

I’m reminded of Jesus’ parting prayer on behalf of his disciples, the one where he prays that “they may all be one.” Between denominations, the technical name for this unity in diversity is “ecumenism.” Within a congregation, the practice of unity in diversity is respect for different gifts, different stories, different lives, all adding up to a common mission.

In my previous life I might have seen Holy Spirit’s work of church building in a literal way—something monolithic, making a single, coherent statement. But these days I tend to think of Spirit’s work of “church” as

² Karoline Lewis, workingpreacher.org

³ *ibid*

weaving. Many-colored threads coming together and diverging to make a beautiful whole cloth. As we learn to trust the weaver, perhaps we can trust God's purpose more than our own. The bottom line for me on this day of our annual meeting is this: that as we trust God to hold us together and reveal our purpose, we can appreciate more deeply the different gifts we all bring to this body we call "church." May we be united in purpose, united in love, to the glory of God and the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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