



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 3 Year C

Indispensable

[RCL]: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

“The knee bone’s connected to the... thigh bone. The thigh bone’s connected to the... hip bone. The hip bone’s connected to the...,” and so on. Does this sound familiar?

Remembering this song is appropriate in getting us to the punchline. It comes from an era of romantic songs and bobby sox. There is also an African American spiritual based on the book of Ezekiel: *Dem Bones*. Does anyone remember that gem?

“Dem bones, dem bones, dem *dry* bones...” One might be tempted to end the phrase with “... and they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love...”

It sounds silly, but it’s not too far off what the Apostle Paul was writing to the church in Corinth; the body is one and has many members: feet and eyes and ears and hands. A head.

Paul instructs us about anatomy: “The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.” Like toes. If you’ve ever broken a toe—or even just stubbed a toe, a fairly common experience—you’ll know how smashing one of these tiny appendages can be felt through the entire body and alter our view of the world *instantly*. Paul, knowing this, writes: “If one member [of the body] suffers, all suffer together with it.” Remember the smashed toe?

Paul is writing to a badly divided and confused group of folks in Corinth. This is the local church of Paul’s ministry. The congregation was disturbed by doubts and suspicion. Relationships were confused and feelings hurt. There were struggles for power and competing factions. And all of this was in a richly gifted community that proclaimed Jesus as their Lord!

Reading deeper into the letters to the Corinthian church, it begins to sound like several toes were smashed and an arm broken and a couple of ribs sore and bruised, perhaps a kidney punched for good measure – and one of the points that Paul makes about Christian responsibility is that this kind of hurtful contention gives the Church, capital “C” Church, a black eye.

“Indeed,” Paul says, “The body does not consist of one member but of many... If one member suffers, all suffer together with it.”

The most obvious Christian community is the gathered congregation, all of us here together. Are there any struggles for power? Are there angers that work *hurt* rather than *healing*? Are there members to which Paul refers as weaker, less honorable, who are strengthened and given a place of honor in this community? What about the smashed toes? Are they bound up with healing salve? And is an arm offered to help the body stand?

Our lessons today are about healing, about getting along, about common good. In modern vernacular, one might say that Paul was urging the Corinthians to recall that “we’re all in this together.”

In short, we need each other.

Relatedness is a hard concept for human beings. We started out just fine, way back and long ago in the garden: man and woman, humanity and animals, the created order and God. We lived in harmony, ate greens instead of each other, and God’s voice was heard in the garden.

But that early Eden of cooperative dependence, of joyful relationship, was broken. And even on a good day, it’s a struggle to imagine what it must have been like, so close to each other and so close to God.

We are in the church season of Epiphany, a time when we hear stories about the manifestations and miracles of God. Epiphany means “a showing of God among us in human flesh.” This is what the wise men found when they followed the star to the baby Jesus—the Lord—and what Paul recognizes in teaching the Corinthians about oneness in the Body.

It’s all about experiencing God among us. It’s about finding God here, now. It is recognizing that God isn’t “out there,” far away, untouchable. God is here, present with us. We meet God in the humanity of Jesus and in each other.

Marcus Borg has described Epiphany as “the appearance on the surface of something from the depths.” This is *Emmanu-el*, God with us, as the prophets of old proclaimed. Our Advent prayer “O come, O come Emanuel” was answered at Christmas, and yet *immediately* we need reminding! What a silly people we are!

Philosopher Paul Tillich says that if we think of God as a supernatural being who is “out there,” far away, unapproachable, hidden perhaps, then the only logical conclusion is atheism. At the very least, it presents a problem with prayer, because if God is too far away and we’re not sure where, do we have to shout to be heard?

Some of the language of our worship suggests that God is indeed far, far away and unavailable to us. There is a real sense that God is “out there” and uninvolved, not among us at all. But what was the message of Christmas that we celebrated and were meant to learn? That *Emmanu-el*, our prayer that God would come among us, has been answered.

Jesus stood up in the synagogue to read from the prophet Isaiah, and then sat down to teach the people, saying, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” The people marveled at him and “were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”

Perhaps this was because all he had done was read a familiar passage from Isaiah proclaiming release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed and the Lord God's favor to "the least of these," the weaker members, the inferior ones.

They did not yet understand the full implication for them of a world where everyone is welcome at God's table with equal place, and that God is there *at the table* and in their midst.

Paul taught about the Body of Christ: that we need each other for wholeness and health in the Body. And Jesus spoke of reconciling hurts and differences and inequities in the larger family of God.

Right now, we're living in a world off-balance. Violence of all kinds is so normal that it doesn't even capture our attention on the evening news. Our elected officials seem often to be at cross-purposes with those they are elected to serve. Relationships are fraught with marriages broken, children ignored, friends too busy to catch up with each other, our old people lonely. What happened? How do we find our way back into a sense of community, of shared purpose, of goals and striving for the good of the whole?

We must understand Paul's teaching that *every member* of the Body is crucial, whether the "Body" is a marriage, a family, a congregation, a neighborhood, a city, a country, or the world! This is true for every person, and because it is so linked to the bedrock of our faith, Jesus, it is especially true for us as Christian believers. We are all members of one Body through baptism, linked together inextricably whether we like it or not. Jesus brought us freedom and vision and salvation and said that he brought it for *all*, for *everyone*, for the big players and the inferior parts. This isn't optional.

Are there any biologists here? One truth we can learn from an observation of basic biology is that systems have a much greater survival rate when complexity is allowed to thrive. Organisms rely on one another for food and all manner of sustenance. Protections are in proper balance. Birth and death rates find their correct proportions for the good of the larger system. Harmony reigns. A modern tale of how this works is the exciting stories making the rounds about the resurgence of the grey wolf population in Yellowstone. All the other parts of the ecosystem from native grasses to small mammals to elk are coming back into sustainable balance. Even the streams—streams of living waters!—are flowing again.

Jesus teaches that the larger family of God shares the responsibility of care, one for another. And Epiphany—this season of Epiphany—reminds us of *Emanuel*, God with us.

But it takes the Apostle Paul to remind us in this morning's lesson that not one of us is ever alone. We have each other and we have God and we are to live as such, in balance and complexity and harmony. In that, we can find both tremendous comfort as well as great responsibility for action.

"The hip bone's connected to the... thigh bone, the thigh bone's connected to the... leg bone, the leg bone's connected to the... ankle bone..."

"...and they'll know we are Christians by our love." Amen.

The Rev. Macbrina Blasdell teaches religious studies online for Park University from the flexible locations allowed by a traveling laptop. She is enjoying the return to her hometown of Phoenix where she revels in growing roses and making anything chocolate.