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1 Corinthians 12:14–31

A MORE EXCELLENT WAY

The metaphor of body parts talking to one another is really quite effective, isn't it? Whether you're doing a children's sermon or proclaiming the word from this pulpit the parts of the human body are reminding one another about their value to the whole and reminding them about their ultimate purpose. Especially on days when we ordain and install people to function within the church, to be officers and servant leaders, we do well to eavesdrop on this conversation between ears and noses.

The purpose of our being gathered into one is to declare the Lordship of Christ through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. We do this by affirming and encouraging one another with the unique gift of love. And yes, this is still the more excellent way. In this era of studying best practices and procedures, there can't be a better practice than to love one another as we have been loved by Christ. The more excellent way is not only to practice; but by the work of the Holy Spirit, to perfect. You don't hear that very often in the church—talking about rising to a level of perfection. But perfect love from Christ brings us to the threshold. Practice and belief.

Before the cold war was over, the Queen of England visited Warsaw, Poland. In the process, she asked for a Polish guide to make sure that she didn't misstep or have any cultural problems; in this way, she not only would have someone to drive her that knew the city, but someone that knew the culture. They were on their way to mass and the Queen asked the driver if he was a Catholic. The driver said, "Believing, but not practicing." So the queen took a moment and then asked, "So does that mean you're a communist?" The driver said, "Practicing, not believing."

How much of what we believe, how much of what we are convinced is absolutely true, are we able to put into practice every day in this church? We, who claim to be part of this body; we, who lay claim to being included in this body—the body of Christ. As members of it, we conduct ourselves in a certain way. The principles of our individual conduct are determined by the fact that we are all called to be a part here. Isn't it interesting that Paul makes certain that this isn't an optional choice. Even if those of us who are feet or hands decide we are going to leave this church, we are still part of this congregation. I've said when people have moved away, "You can move away as far as you want, but you are still part of our family. You are still part of this congregation."

One of the ways that we know this is true is by following certain principles that guide everything else—principles that fit no matter the circumstances. One of those is that everyone here who comes into our midst will experience the presence of Christ by the way in which we welcome them. They will leave better because we blessed them with Christ's presence that had been a gift to us.

Another principle in addition to the presence of Christ is the peace that permeates every one of our relationship contacts. We love to share that peace with one another because

it is a peace that diminishes our need for defense. It takes away fear in such a way that we can see one another and know that we are going to experience Christ, and we don't need to be afraid of being chastised or judged, of being put down, or made to feel uncomfortable. The peace of Christ takes away all fear.

A third principle that we observe is not only the presence and the peace, but it is the conviction that everyone who comes here has a good contribution to make to this body. Everybody matters. And so we take extra time to accentuate the good qualities that we see in one another. A strong suit that is not part of our natural behavior, but we see it in someone else, and we know it's essential for contributing to the good of all. Now sometimes we forget to do this. And when we do forget, the body is not as healthy as it could be—as God intended. But the more we practice naming the good we see in others, the easier it becomes. The more we're intentional about saying "Yes, I know I can't do it all." The easier it becomes to rely upon one another.

That's just not something that Presbyterians do well, is it? We would rather take care of things ourselves. Even if we know we can't do it as well as someone else, we hate being a bother; and so we make the body less healthy by not allowing the hand to do the work it was designed to do. It really is a pretty comical passage, when you think about it, isn't it? If the whole body were a nose, where would be the walking?

Finally, we practice the principles of presence and peace, and speaking of one another's good qualities, and the principle of a world view where we see Jesus in all of creation, from the rain forests to snow-capped mountain ranges. From children's laughter to the challenges of a disabled veteran, we see Jesus more clearly when we look at the whole presence, peace, speak only with kindness, and a world view infused with the image of Christ—all these principles make us healthy. And they make us know that we are in the right place with the right people at the right time.

I want to share a challenge that has come to me and a charge which I believe applies to a day like today. We have all come together as members of Christ's body. We all drank deeply once again from the refreshing Holy Spirit. We are prepared to go and share our spiritual gifts in service and in this world. If we are a foot, we still walk the path of freedom and justice. If we are a hand, we will touch others for the sake of healing. If we are an eye, we will remain open to the vision of God's kingdom. And if we are an ear, we will listen for God's word—especially in the world's pain.

As the spirit uses us to recreate the body of Jesus Christ, we will share the powerful love of one who created us in the beginning—the touching grace of the one who redeemed us and the indwelling life of one who gives us strength. Now and always.

So remember as we ordain and install new officers today what's really taking place. The body is being knit in a new way and the result is Christ's presence with us.

So may it always be in this place. Amen.