



## **DISABILITY AWARENESS**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, October 18, 2009**

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**Lection – 1 Corinthians 12:14-27** (New International Version)

(v. 14) Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. (v. 15) If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. (v. 16) And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. (v. 17) If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? (v. 18) But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. (v. 19) If they were all one part, where would the body be? (v. 20) As it is, there are many parts, but one body. (v. 21) The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don't need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don't need you!” (v. 22) On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, (v. 23) and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, (v. 24) while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, (v. 25) so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. (v. 26) If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. (v. 27) Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Before cultivating ideas around the liturgical moment, it is important to work with a common definition of disability. Although many people assume that most common disabilities are those associated with visible manifestations such as use of wheelchairs, white canes and sign language, most disabilities are caused by “hidden” conditions. Hidden disabilities are physical or mental conditions that are not readily apparent to

others, such as learning disabilities, diabetes, epilepsy, asthma, low vision, poor hearing, heart disease, depression or chronic illness.

**Disability awareness Sunday is not about listing ailments or issues, but rather highlighting the subject-hood of all of humanity.** It encourages the church to become its best self through finding ways to express love and community regardless of difference. The hope of disability awareness, or what we will reference as differently abled bodies, is that communities acknowledge the visible and hidden causes that influence members to participate (or not) in the life of the Church. The primary purpose of any Disability Awareness Sunday is to create openings for God through the religious community to invite, affirm and acknowledge difference. It is, therefore, the public admittance that every congregation is incomplete without the contributions of all its members. 1 Corinthians 12:12-24 challenges the church to appreciate “the body” and its different functioning parts, as opposed to focusing on any particular body’s functionality. Thus, the worship moment is where all are able to add to the richness of the experience, regardless of their visible or hidden differences.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 1 Corinthians 12:14-27**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

I have been deeply influenced by a host of women and men in my life, but I want to highlight two very important women in my life -- in this case, my eldest sister, who was diagnosed as bipolar, and my wife, who has a significant hearing loss (greater than fifty percent). I chose these two women because they do not have visible disabilities. I believe there are a lot more people in our congregations that deal silently with issues of difference, and these issues largely go unaddressed due to their invisibility or stigmas that we might attach if made aware of the differences. What I have learned is that, while their differences may not be visible, they are always present. In the 1980s, when my sister was first diagnosed, I was amazed at how the mention of this hidden disability would clear a room due to the lack of understanding. However, my parents, along with my sister, never hid her difference and continued to bring her to church. Church for our family truly became our sanctuary, that place of solace and affirmation for my sister. Twenty-six years later my sister is leading a robust life and fully integrated in her church as a worship leader; yet, she is still bi-polar. This affirms the possibility for congregations to faithfully embrace difference while simultaneously benefiting from the embrace.

In the words of Howard Thurman, we must fight the temptation of “the sin of pride and arrogance that has tended to vitiate the missionary impulse to make it an instrument of self-righteousness.”<sup>1</sup> It should not be assumed that a disability has some spiritual ramifications and that persons are automatically hurting. The world is filled with persons who may be hurting and may or may not have disabilities. On the other hand, there are those who have disabilities who are not hurting but simply want to be acknowledged as members of a community and embraced. Whatever the case, it is important to understand that the church’s role is not to “missionize” those who have different abilities. The church must create spaces for those with disabilities to be respected, acknowledged, but not

made a spectacle. My wife is a beautiful sister inside and out, but when people notice her hearing aids there is an interesting change in deportment. At times, people patronize her or even make unsolicited commentaries; yet, others stare at her ears. It is amazing what happens when people begin to “see” her disability. My time with her over the last fifteen years has made me keenly cognizant that church must be that space where we address issues of difference, and not in a patronizing way, but in a way that broadens the landscape. The worship experience must respect all of our differences; but, most importantly, respect all of our contributions, as faithful members of our community.

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

The relevance of the letter to the church at Corinth has much to do with the universality of the issues confronting them. The church is competing with multiple priorities and trying to understand its identity. This letter allows us to eavesdrop on a conversation between pastor and people. Paul is addressing some of the competing influences within the congregation and the strife that is causing division within the church.

Paul is not directly addressing disability in this scripture, but he is addressing the attributes of a functioning community or body. Albeit the Corinthian congregation has competing influences with different backgrounds, social locations and cultures, there is no part that has greater significance than the other. The point Paul drives home is that a functioning body is made up of multiple parts. It is to this point that Paul begins to think through the different areas of his own body and share how no part has dominance over the other.

The abolishment of hierarchy, albeit somewhat eschatological, is important to place in the foreground. It is the pronouncement of equity in the kingdom of God that is Paul’s thesis. We are all equal contributors to the community of God. Our contribution is not impaired or improved by our function. However, the body’s functionality is impaired or improved by our ability to know our function and to add to the work of the Kingdom accordingly. Whatever God has called us to do within the life of the church and the world, we have a function. Not only is the body improved by the contribution of different functions, but the functionality of the body is contingent upon the interconnectedness of the parts. It is important to know for what purpose we are created; but, equally important, is who created us. The simple fact that we are God’s creation provides automatic validity and the vitality to contribute.

## **Celebration**

There is equality in the kingdom of God. Regardless of the labels, categories and hierarchies outside of the church, within the church, we are all one body. It is this “oneness” that provides a space for difference. Paul points out that we are all different, not one member of the body has superiority or can claim that another member is less or more vital. This is the hope of our faith that, as we continue to appreciate the differences of others, we embrace our own differences. When we can embrace our differences, we can make a more joyful noise, a greater impact for the kingdom, and contribute more

fully as our best selves. It is not our similarities, but our differences that make us vital in God's economy!

### **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details in the passage include:

**Sights:** A physical body; hands and ears – different parts of the body;

**Sounds:** The conversation between the body parts; one body part speaking rhetorically to the other; and

**Smells:** 1 Corinthians 17b asks: If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? This verse may be helpful in thinking through the power of smell in our lives and how we function without it.

### **III. Other Suggestions for Preaching and Teaching**

- A key verse with which to spend some quiet moments is 1 Corinthians 19. “If they were all one part, where would the body be?” Raise the question what if we were all the same in God – where would we be?
- In preaching, make the analogous move from body parts to the life of the church. The hands could be the ushers; the mouth could be the choir; the eyes the Pastor; and the ears could be the deacons. Share the correlation between differences and functionality.
- Key phrases/words in the text: No division; body; God has arranged the parts; God has combined the members; many parts but one body; parts should have equal concern for one another; you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it. The body parts: feet; hands; nose (instrument for smelling); ear and eye.

### **Notes**

1. Thurman, Howard. Jesus and the Disinherited. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996. pp. 12-13.