



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“ONE BODY, MANY MEMBERS”

Scripture Lessons: Luke 4:14-21; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

*This sermon was preached by Dr. James T. Rogers on Sunday, January 27, 2019
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

It was the summer of 2017. My family was temporarily living in the church’s carriage house on Tradd Street while our home was being renovated. We were in the midst of a pastoral transition as Dr. Joe Harvard and Rev. Maggie Beamguard had concluded their ministry here and we were anticipating the arrival of Dr. Siegling as our new Senior Pastor. Because of this transition, for several months I was able to serve as acting head of staff, which was both exciting and challenging. One afternoon I sent a group text message to several current and former church staff members, writing, “Joe Harvard left me some pretty big shoes to fill.” Always pastoral, Rev. Beamguard texted back enthusiastically, “You can do it!” It was then that I texted a photo of Dr. Harvard’s actual shoes. I had found them under a bed in the church’s carriage house. “I think they are size 13,” I wrote.

Dr. Harvard did leave some pretty big shoes to fill both literally and figuratively. His gifts for building relationships, building bridges, and delivering heartfelt sermons were such a blessing for our church community during a time of transition. And our church has been blessed by the ministry of so many pastors. How providential it was for me to be mentored by Dr. Danny Massie during my first years in pastoral ministry. His humility and carefully crafted sermons have impacted the faith of so many. I will never forget Rev. Beamguard’s sermon following the shootings at Emanuel AME and her gifts for pastoral care. And now God has called Dr. Siegling to be our Pastor and Head of Staff, with his energy, positive attitude, and ability to preach in a powerful way. And he is also a fan of the Clemson Tigers.

Sometimes in the church, it can be tempting, especially when we are surrounded by such excellent leadership, to celebrate and elevate some people and their gifts, while unintentionally ignoring or devaluing others within the body of Christ. After all, that is the way the world works. The CEO of a company is valued more than the janitor. The head football coach is more important than the water boy. The president of the university is compensated at a different level than the school’s food service staff. The world tells us that some people and some gifts are more important than others.

The celebration of certain people and certain gifts was such a problem for the church at Corinth that the Apostle Paul addressed it in his letter to them around 50 A.D. He writes that they are not “lacking in spiritual gifts”¹ as the Spirit has generously granted them all sorts of gifts: the message of wisdom, the message of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, miraculous powers, declaring the divine will, discernment, speaking in tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. But now some in the Corinthian church were apparently declaring that they were more spiritual than others. Others may have declared that speaking in tongues, or speaking in a language previously unknown to the speaker in order to communicate the gospel message, was the best gift of all and a certain sign of God’s spirit. Others were probably looking down on those who were unable to speak in tongues. So Paul offers the church at Corinth a metaphor: the church is like a human body. While other ancient writings often used the image of body to remind those with low social status of their position in

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:7b (New Revised Standard Version)

society² and keep them in their place, Paul uses this metaphor to make a completely different point: every part of the body is important.

I was reminded this week that the human body has 206 bones and over 600 muscles, not to mention skin, ligaments, cartilage, veins, arteries, blood, fat, and more.³ Just one single movement, a step, a breath, a high five, or a fist bump requires many different body parts to work together in unison. The human body is a very complex system, full of diversity and unity.

So Paul tells the church at Corinth that they are like a human body. Just as many different parts make up the human body, many members make up the body of Christ. No matter their differences, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, through the work of the Holy Spirit at baptism, they have become one body, arranged by God himself, so that no one should feel worthless or unimportant and likewise no one should boast, for all have been given different gifts for the good of the community.

Each year as the eighth grade confirmation class studies this passage from First Corinthians, we have members of the class pair up and consider what part of the body their partner is and why. It is exciting to see the diversity of gifts that God gives the confirmation class each year: John is the mouth because he is good at singing praises to God. Grace is a hand because she is always serving those in need. Elizabeth is an eye because she sees when someone is in need of prayer.

Unfortunately, there are some in the church at Corinth who given their role in the community have such a low self-esteem that they feel worthless and unimportant and even wish they were another part of the body. So Paul imagines a conversation between the body parts, writing, "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. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?"⁴ Paul is telling these members of the church that they are important and a necessary part of the body. Paul is telling those who feel they have a low status in the community that they play an indispensable role.

There are others in the church at Corinth who struggle with holding others in low esteem. These people think they are more important. So Paul imagines another conversation, writing, "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.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect."⁵ Paul is telling those who have been boasting that every member is equally important in the well-being of the body. No member of the body can say to another, "I have no need of you."

² Troy Miller, "1 Corinthians 12:12-31a: Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1*, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville: 2009), p. 279.

³ Raewynne J. Whiteley, "1 Corinthians 12:12-31a: Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1*, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville: 2009), p. 279.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:15-17 (NRSV)

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:21-23 (NRSV)

And what Paul tells the church at Corinth, is true for the church at the corner of Meeting and Tradd today. No one is less important. No one brings less to the body of Christ. No one's gift is superior to all others.⁶ Everyone is called by God to contribute in his or her special way. Everyone is needed for the church to be whole. Every single person matters: our youngest members, the homebound elderly, college students away at school, those with disabilities, as well as those who are able to commit large amounts of time and resources for Christ's church. All are important.

Next Sunday almost forty high school and middle school youth will be leading worship at both services for Youth Sunday. Back in November this group of young people, supported by their adult advisors, chose the theme of sheep and over the past few weeks they have been busily preparing by writing prayers, liturgy, and sermons. I have been overwhelmed by their enthusiasm and excitement for planning and leading worship. And next Sunday is an opportunity for our church to say to our young people: You are important. You matter to the body of Christ. You have a role to play.

When Dr. Massie served as our Senior Pastor, among the photographs in his office was one of a woman named Pauline. Pauline and her husband Jack were members in the church Dr. Massie served in Kingsport, Tennessee. When Jack was sent away for World War II, Pauline developed rheumatoid arthritis, which crippled her to the point that she was almost bedridden. Because of her wonderful spirit and wisdom, church members would often call Pauline with concerns. During the Vietnam War, Pauline even worked for the Red Cross, working from her bed. One year her name was submitted to the nominating committee at the church for the office of elder, but because of her physical limitations, some wondered if it would be too hard for her to attend Session meetings. Dr. Massie suggested that they should let Pauline make that decision. She accepted the nomination, was elected, and was the only elder in her class that didn't miss a single Session meeting for the whole term of service. Everyone is important. Everyone matters to the body of Christ. Everyone has a role to play.

Each year our church sets aside money in the budget for me to visit with our college students who have left town for school. This past October I was able to visit with twenty-five of our college students at campuses in South Carolina and Georgia. It is a joy to meet with these students on your behalf, share a meal, and pray for them. These visits are a reminder to these students that even though they are away from home, we have not forgotten them, and they are important to the body of Christ. I will not soon forget a visit I made several years ago to see a student at Appalachian State University. After we shared breakfast, he shared how I could be praying for him. But before I could start praying, he said, "James, how can I be praying for you?" And he did. Everyone is important. Everyone matters to the body of Christ. Everyone has a role to play.

Elizabeth Anderson was nineteen years old when I met her. As a young adult member of our church she frequently attended school sporting events, loved the outdoors, and was a fan of country music. Elizabeth also had muscular dystrophy, a disease that causes progressive weakness and loss of muscle mass, and she eventually relied on a wheel chair to move around. I am certain that her experience with this disease gave her a deeper understanding of Paul's metaphor of the church as a human body than I will ever attain. Several weeks before she passed away, Dr. Siegling and I made a home visit to offer some pastoral care. And yet during that visit it was Elizabeth who offered pastoral care to me, asking how I was doing and acknowledging the sorrow that comes from losing a pregnancy. Countless others have shared with me the great impact that

⁶ J. Paul Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 10: Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians*, (Abingdon Press, Nashville: 2002), p. 948-949.

Elizabeth has had on their faith. Everyone is important. Everyone matters to the body of Christ. Everyone has a role to play.

Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, male or female, young or old, rich or poor, native Charlestonian or from “off,” public school student or private school student, able bodied or with physical limitations, single or married, widow or widower, employed or out of work, Republican or Democrat, we have been baptized into one body through the power of the Holy Spirit. And therefore everyone is important. Everyone matters to the body of Christ. Everyone has a role to play.

You are important. You matter to the body of Christ. You have a role to play. It is your shoes that will be the toughest to fill, because in the body of Christ, no one can fill them quite like you.