

September 12, 2021
Rev. Kerry Smith

The Church We Are Called to Be
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Common English Bible

Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many. We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one Spirit to drink. Certainly the body isn't one part but many. If the foot says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not a hand," does that mean it's not part of the body? If the ear says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not an eye," does that mean it's not part of the body? If the whole body were an eye, what would happen to the hearing? And if the whole body were an ear, what would happen to the sense of smell? But as it is, God has placed each one of the parts in the body just like he wanted. If all were one and the same body part, what would happen to the body? But as it is, there are many parts but one body. So the eye can't say to the hand, "I don't need you," or in turn, the head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you." Instead, the parts of the body that people think are the weakest are the most necessary. The parts of the body that we think are less honorable are the ones we honor the most. The private parts of our body that aren't presentable are the ones that are given the most dignity. The parts of our body that are presentable don't need this. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the part with less honor so that there won't be division in the body and so the parts might have mutual concern for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it. You are the body of Christ and parts of each other.

Church is a place where we can work toward the common good. Sometimes in our world it can feel like we're missing the boat on the common good. Instead of working for the good of all, instead of respecting the rights and responsibilities of all people, we are only in it for ourselves. On Monday we had gone on a bike ride which was glorious. When you're on a bike ride, if you see people walking or slower bike riders, when you pass them you say "on your left". However, I have noticed that many people don't hear me say "on your left," because they have their headphones in. They are in their own world and they aren't aware that I am going to be passing them on their left. Sometimes I scare the walkers as I go by because they were in their own world.

Last week I came home one day and told my spouse that I was sad. He asked why and I shrugged my shoulders and then shared that I had learned about someone in my sphere who had died from COVID. People in our neighborhoods, in our families, in our workplaces are dying because they're not getting the COVID vaccine. Our school boards look like wrestling matches as parents fight about children wearing masks in schools. Some days it all feels too much and I want all the people to go away. There will be a dumb person weaving through traffic like we're in the Indy 500. Or someone talking on their phone standing in the middle of the aisle at the grocery store and no one can get by.

There was an article in the paper about how we are becoming a nation of vigilantes with the passing of SB 8, banning abortions six weeks into a pregnancy. Anyone can bring a lawsuit against medical practitioners who violate the ban and there are cash bounties of at least \$10,000 plus legal fees to encourage lawsuits. It is a law that is enforced by private individuals not the state, but it's not just in Texas. In Tennessee, students and teachers can sue schools that allow transgender students to use the restrooms that match their gender identity. In Florida students can sue schools that allow transgender girls to play on girls' sports teams. There are bills being worked on in many states letting parents sue schools if teachers and outside speakers mention the principles of critical race theory. What's next? Can I sue someone for damages if they hand out water to voters waiting hours to vote? Can I sue an employer or landlords of undocumented people? Laws used to give rights for people to have autonomy over their bodies, their words, or

their votes. Now, that paradigm is inverted giving rights to people who are offended by what they see, hear or imagine.¹

This week we watched Stanley Tucci's *Searching for Italy*. I learned that Sicily is not the southernmost island of Italy. 173 miles south of Sicily is an island called Lampedusa with 5,000 people. It is seventy miles east of the coast of Africa. Thousands of migrants and asylum seekers arrive on its shores every year. Over the last six years, 18,000 people fleeing poverty and war have died in the Mediterranean Sea. I heard that while watching the show and I couldn't believe it. I googled and it's true.² Stanley Tucci visits with a fisherman's family who talked about seeing migrants on boats. They ask for water or for help. Whoever lands is identified by authorities and then taken to the Italian mainland within 48 hours. They arrive on a daily basis but fishermen can't take them on board. Migration is the leading political issue in Italy, and this tiny island stands out for its compassion. In 2014 the whole island was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

The fisherman Stanley Tucci talked with had saved migrants in the past, but then there was a government clampdown and fishermen who saved migrants faced fines and even imprisonment. This fisherman was so conflicted to see the desperation of migrants and to know that if he helped he risked prison himself. He cried as he talked about a morning in 2013 when he saw 300 refugees on board of a boat, all the fishermen tried to help them, but 280 of them died.

Yesterday was the twentieth anniversary of 9/11. A day for us to remember the lives that were lost, the despair and the grief. A day for us to remember the heroes who rushed to help. Ripples of that tragic day continue to impact our world twenty years later. Did we have this much fear and hatred of people from other countries before that horrific day? I remember the weekend after Trump's Muslim ban. I was selling Girl Scouts cookies outside of Walmart. We had two tables and I looked down at the other table and there was a woman in a burqa buying Girl Scout cookies. I was like, "This is America!"

We know that the way we behave towards one another is the fullest expression of what we believe, but we aren't doing it. We come to church to be in community with other Christians who are working to do the next right thing towards the common good. Working for the good of all, respecting the rights and responsibilities of all people. Church is all about the common good. In our scripture reading today Paul gives us this beautiful metaphor of a human body. If you don't have the kidneys, you can't function. You need all the parts, even the lesser body parts. You may try to hide your gross toes, but if you don't have toes it is really hard to balance. God has called us together to be Christ's body, and each one of us is indispensable. Everyone has a role and no role is too small. God gives each of us distinct gifts equipping each of us that we may become more faithful followers of Christ. We must serve, not sit. We are all connected and we are greater as one body working for the common good than any of us could be on our own.

When we work for the common good, the world around us is transformed. There are people who choose to donate organs to people that they have never met so that other people can live! There are people who are working tirelessly every day to reduce their carbon footprint. There are people like Rosie Curts, Trish Major, and Robyn Kirk who donate their time with Planned Parenthood assembling nearly 600 kits with pregnancy tests and contraceptives. I remember sharing with Ron Hardy about how I had given blood at Lakewood UMC with our blood drive and he shared with me that he had donated over six gallons. When I asked Ron how

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/04/opinion/texas-abortion-law.html>

² <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/20055/migrant-deaths-19000-in-mediterranean-in-past-6-years>

many gallons he had donated, I asked his permission to share and he said, "I feel honored to be able to do a little something where I can."

People who are living a sacrificial life so that others can get what they need. Church gives us the grounding to be that kind of person. Sometimes I wonder if I would be different without the church community around me offering me support and helping me to reset each week. The church we are called to be works for the good of all, respecting the rights and responsibilities of all people. The church we are called to be encourages us to work for the common good as we leave this sanctuary and go out to do ministry in the world. We give our third graders Bibles today so that they will read them and learn about God who calls us to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). We give them Bibles so they will read stories about Jesus who cared for the stranger, the widow, and the orphan. If we don't have the church to remind us to do the next right thing and to be about the common good of others, who will?