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First Presbyterian Church
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2nd in the series “Who is My Neighbor?”
1 Corinthians 12

“Unity in Diversity”

Last week I began the sermon series “Who Is My Neighbor?” My hope is that as we explore this question we’ll start to tear down the walls that divide us as a nation. A lofty goal, I realize, but as Christians we are called to see the face of God in everyone, even the neighbor we don’t like or the neighbor who isn’t all that neighborly.

A lot of you talked to me after last week’s sermon, or reached out to me to say you appreciated what I said but that what I said was a challenge. And it absolutely was – is – a challenge; a challenge which, by the way, I share. It isn’t easy to see the image of God in someone we don’t really like or, quite frankly, is acting in a way that is anything but Christ-like. Or has a political sign in their yard that goes against our political leanings or is waving a flag that we don’t like. Believe me, I get it. So we’re all in this thing together, OK?

We’re also not the first ones to face such deep divisions. Luckily for us we have the Bible which is so full of stories about people who don’t get along that we will never ever run out of material to read, study, reflect on and consider how we can do better. And the scripture we just heard, 1 Corinthians 12, is all about people who don’t get along.

For those of you who aren’t familiar with 1 Corinthians or need a little refresher, the book isn’t actually a book but is a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. The church in Corinth was a young, vibrant community, and the city was bustling with a mix of cultures, beliefs and social classes. But like many communities, they had serious issues and within the church, these differences began to cause conflict. People were aligning themselves with different leaders; they were struggling to understand how their newfound faith aligned with their previous cultural practices; and they believed some people’s spiritual gifts were far superior to other people’s spiritual gifts – which is what chapter 12 is about.

Paul saw this and knew something needed to change or the church would implode. So he wrote his letter to try and prevent that from happening, using the metaphor of the human body – which was really quite brilliant – to drive home the point that just as a body has many parts, each of which is essential to the functioning of the body, so too the church is made up of different members, each with unique gifts and roles which are essential to the functioning of the church.

Now note what Paul was not saying, because this is important. Paul wasn't saying that differences don't matter, or that we need to just agree to disagree or support open another no matter what our beliefs are. Seeking unity doesn't mean that anything goes; Jesus never taught that, and neither did Paul. Quite the contrary. Paul says that our differences do matter; they matter a lot. In fact, our differences are crucial for the health of the body. Remember what he said: the hand can't say to the foot, I don't need you. And the eye can't say to the ear, get lost. The body can't be made up solely of an eye, or a foot or a hand or a head. We need all these different pieces to function. But when these different pieces stop engaging with one another, or retreat to their own camps, or label those who disagree as an enemy, calcification sets in.

You all know what calcification is, right? Calcification is a process in which calcium builds up in body tissue, causing it to harden. And while some calcification is normal from age and wear and tear, some can cause serious damage.

UCLA political scientist Lynn Vavrek says this is the stage we've reached in our politics. We've gone beyond being divided or even polarized; We're now calcified, which is to say we are so rigid in our political leanings that we're not willing to alter our positions in even a small way. And this rigidness has made things more heated and our elections really close. Calcification, Vavrek argues, is why there's so little movement in the polls when, for example, Trump is found guilty on 34 felony counts or an assassination attempt is made on his life; or when Joe Biden performs so horribly at a debate that he drops out of the race or Harris enters the race with 4 months to go. If we weren't so calcified, so hardened and rigid, Vavrek argues there would be movement. It would matter that all this stuff has happened because these are significant moments that under normal circumstances would cause movement, but they don't because we are calcified.

Given this deep hardening, it's tempting and far easier to simply throw up our hands and say, "Let's just agree to disagree." But does that solve anything? Or does it just give us a hall pass to avoid doing the hard work of getting rid of this calcium buildup?

About 5 years ago I noticed that I was having trouble with my left shoulder. My range of motion had decreased so much that I couldn't raise my arm as high as I once could. And in typical Annie Epling fashion, I ignored it. For months. Until . . . I went give the benediction one Sunday and realized, "I can't lift my arm!" So I finally called my doctor. She said two things: one, you need to go across the hall and make an appointment with a physical therapist and 2: you might need to see an orthopedist. But let's see how the therapy goes

first. So I went across the hall and scheduled my first appointment at which time the therapist told me I probably had frozen shoulder.

I bring all of this up because there were days I didn't want to do my exercises; days when I thought "what difference do they really make? Is this silly little exercise really going to fix my shoulder? But I kept at it until eventually I regained my normal range of motion.

Friends, just like it was easier for me to ignore my shoulder rather than go to PT and put in the time to fix my shoulder, it's easier for all of us to sit in our rigid camps. And, it's certainly easier to throw up our hands and say, Can't we all just be friends and agree to disagree? Or just support each other no matter what our beliefs are? (This is the sort of stuff I see on Facebook.) But the answer is no; you have to do the hard work of PT. Because the truth is, God calls us to be better than we are. Just like Paul called the Corinthians to rise about their divisions, God calls us today to move beyond the fractures – the rigidity – that has built up *in our bones*. We are not called to be passive, to "agree to disagree" and avoid the hard work of compromise. We are called to engage with one another in love and truth, and to see unity in diversity.

But how? How do we do that?

Let me offer up a suggestion – a suggestion I recently became aware of but resonates so deeply; it comes from Parker Palmer, a Quaker theologian. Palmer offers us a way forward when he says, "When the going gets rough, turn to wonder."

Turning to wonder invites us to stay curious about the person in front of us, even when we disagree. It invites us to approach conversations with humility, seeking to understand before seeking to be understood. Maybe the other person is a toe with a completely different perspective and role . . . when we are a finger, seeing from a completely different vantage point and concerned about something wholly different than a toe would. The idea of turning to wonder directs us to sacred curiosity. Instead of thinking "What he said really ticks me off!" We might ask, "I wonder why that led me to feel so strongly." Or, "What might this person be going through? What fears or hopes are shaping their perspective? So we can approach every person as a child of God, with humility, curiosity, and a desire for compromise.

Which, again, does not mean that we are called to just "agree to disagree." Paul didn't tell the Corinthians that it was fine for them to keep their factions. And Jesus certainly didn't say that "anything goes." He called people to a life of truth, justice, and love—a life that mirrors the very heart of God. In the same way, we are not called to stand back and pretend that all beliefs, all actions, or all words are equally valid. Instead, we are called to seek a deeper unity—one that is rooted in truth and driven by love.

Because just like the church in Corinth, we find ourselves in a time of deep division. The Corinthians were fighting over leadership, spiritual gifts, and status, while we today are torn apart by political ideologies, cultural clashes, and moral disagreements. The same spirit of factionalism that threatened to destroy the early church threatens to tear apart our communities, our nation, and even our relationships with one another.

But as hard as it is, let's commit to turning to wonder. Let's ask ourselves "What can I learn from this moment, and what is God trying to teach me here?"

Friends, Paul calls us to be one body—many parts, but one body in Christ. And while Our differences are real, they are not meant to divide us. We need each other. And in our diversity of thought, background, and gifts, God is calling us to be better than we are—to live in unity, to love more courageously, and to build bridges where the world builds walls.

So let us rise to that calling, not by shrinking from hard conversations or pretending that truth doesn't matter, but by stepping into the mess of our divided world with the grace and love of Christ. Let us turn to wonder. Let us seek understanding, reconciliation, and justice. And let us, as one body, reflect the kingdom of God—where love is greater than fear, truth is pursued with humility, and we are all made better in the process.

May God grant us the courage to be that body, for God's glory and the healing of this world.
Amen.
