

Title: The weaker members

Text: I Corinthians 12:12-31a, Luke 4:14-21

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“The members of the body that seem to be weaker are necessary” (I Cor. 12:22). That’s what Paul says in our passage from I Corinthians—Ben mentioned this verse in his sermon last Sunday, and I’ve been thinking about it all week. What does the apostle Paul mean? Why are the weaker members necessary? Why does God give greater honor to the lesser members, the inferior parts, the weakest members, the least honorable parts?

Since we’re all adults here, let’s get to the heart of the matter. Paul is talking about human genitalia. Yes, that’s what Paul is talking about when he describes the fragile or vulnerable, yet necessary members of the body. Paul uses this human analogy to talk about the weaker members of the church body—those members we recognize as fragile or weak or least honorable. Paul makes this connection obvious in verse 22: “the apparently weaker members are actually necessary.”<sup>1</sup> This is the clean version, a translation that doesn’t require parental guidance. The Greek word translated as “necessary” has another common meaning—*anagkaia*: it has two common meanings, “necessary” and “genitals.” And Paul capitalizes on the dual meaning of the word—there’s a part of the body, he says, that is absolutely necessary for the functioning of life: that is, the *necessary* member, the private parts, or whatever euphemism you want to use.

So, now that you know what Paul is up to in this passage, let me read it to you again:

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 actually necessary, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less presentable have more beauty, whereas our presentable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving greater honor to the lesser member...<sup>2</sup>

Paul uses human anatomy to make a basic point about the corporate body of the church. Every part is necessary; without eyes or feet, the body cannot function as it is created to function. Every part, every member, is absolutely necessary—that’s Paul’s basic point throughout this section in I Corinthians. But then he adds, with a wink and a smile: *Yes, even that “necessary member” is absolutely necessary, it’s the*

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<sup>1</sup> This is Dale B. Martin’s translation in *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 95.

<sup>2</sup> This is the NRSV with a few modifications from Martin’s translation: *Corinthian Body, Again*, 94.

*most necessary part of the body.* As Paul says, “God has so arranged the body, giving greater honor to this lesser member” (v. 25). The lesser member, the part of the body that we keep hidden, that is least presentable, is actually the most necessary member, the most honored, the most beautiful.

Paul doesn’t say anything new when he talks about people as if they were one body. Everyone in Corinth understood that kind of language—it was as old as the ancient philosopher Plato. Citizens form one body—together, all of the people form a political body. But here’s the difference between Paul and all the other Greek and Roman philosophers and politicians: While Paul’s contemporaries talked about every member of society as being an absolutely necessary part of the body, everyone knew that the *head* was the most necessary. And the head of the political body was the sovereign, the king, the one at the top of the masses. While people were told that they were necessary to the health of the social body, the king was the most necessary member of society. Without him, everything would fall apart.

But Paul takes this body language and turns it upside-down. The head is not the most necessary member; the *necessary member* is the most necessary member—the genitals, not the head. And then Paul talks about the nature of that necessary member—it’s hidden, fragile, weak, and vulnerable. It’s easily forgotten as you go about your daily work, unless you have to use the bathroom—then you quickly discover its necessity. Or for sex. I won’t go into details.

Even though we don’t have kings anymore, our context is similar to Paul’s. Let me point out a few ways. We are told that we are all necessary members of American society, but we know that we are not the most necessary. Those people are on Capital Hill. That’s the head of the body called the United States. If one of us disappeared tomorrow, the political body of the United States wouldn’t bat an eye. But if the president disappeared, then we would be in a state of emergency. To be told that we are necessary to the health of the U.S. is really an empty statement—something to make us feel good about ourselves without making any real difference for our lives. Our so-called representatives really don’t care about representing you or me; instead they rely on polling data, on popular opinion—and I’ve never been polled or asked any questions. Not one of my representatives has ever asked me if she or he actually represented my ideas about how society should be organized. They make national decisions on my behalf without asking for my consent. One way to take the incredibly low voter turn out in the United States is to say that people have figured out that their voices don’t really make a difference. At the very least, it has become untrue for political leaders to claim that their authority comes from the consent of the people—how can that be true anymore if so many people don’t vote for them? Are the people who don’t vote no longer part of “We, the people”? Whatever you think about the brokenness of the political system and what we should do about it, if anything, the point is that the heads of the body don’t need the lesser members of society. The people with power in this country don’t need to consult with this guy called Wolf who lives in the woods behind Wal-mart. He

doesn't matter. He is not a necessary member. His vote will not be courted in any election.

We could also talk about how economic power is also hierarchically organized in this country—a new kind of trickle down economics seems to be alive and well. Our government has taken money from the masses and given it to the heads of the financial industry—all for the sake of the health of our national body, or so they say. In our economy, the head is honored with gifts and special treatment, not the vulnerable members.

For us to talk about politics and economics is not an extra feature of the gospel—at least not for Paul. It's not like politics is a topic we can choose to talk about or not. It's actually a topic internal to the gospel—our spirituality has a political form, a material body. Spirit and body, the church and politics—the two cannot be separated. For the apostle Paul, to expose the failures of the political systems we live in is part of the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul is engaging in subversive politics. He is exposing the contradictions within the established structures. The people in power use the metaphor of the human body to show that their position is most important to the health of the political body. Without the head, they say, society would fall apart. And Paul takes their language and turns their world upside-down. The head is no more important than any other member—except for the genitals, the *necessary* member. For Paul, the advent of Christ, the good news of Jesus, is that all things are made new—the old structures of power are passing away, they have outlived their usefulness. Through Christ, there is now a new way of being together, a new way of being a political organism, a new way of being a body.

Worldly politics, worldly power, is centered on the head of the body, “the heads of state,” we could say. The *head* becomes the most important member. But for Paul, in the church the forgotten members—the hidden and vulnerable and fragile—are the most important. That's where Paul focuses our attention—on the vulnerable and weak, not the people on the top. The gospel is about forming a body, an assembly of people—what Paul calls “the church.” And when Paul talks about this body of people called “the church,” he isn't using specialized religious language. He isn't talking about a religious gathering for spiritual people. The word church—in Greek it's *ekklesia*—is a common word for a political gathering, the same word people would use for a town hall meeting or a session of Congress. Let me read you the definition from the standard Greek lexicon—*ekklesia*: Generally understood in the Greco-Roman world as a regularly summoned legislative body, an assembly (BDAG).

Basically, Paul is saying that the authorized legislative bodies are not healthy bodies because they focus on the head—power flows from and returns to the head. And instead of sitting around and letting them make a mess of things, there's a new legislative body that Jesus started and in it we care about the lesser members of society: the vulnerable, the hidden, the fragile, the weak. It's all there at the beginning of Jesus' ministry as we heard already from Luke's Gospel: “he has

anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free..." (Lk. 4:18).

To receive this good news, the gospel of Jesus, into our lives is all about making room in our body, in our lives together, for the weakest members—and not just make room, but give them the place of honor and find out how they are absolutely necessary to the health of our church and society.

The gospel creates a body where the most vulnerable are the most necessary. Now let's make this personal. It's easy to talk about the contradictions at the heart of U.S. politics and economics. But it's another thing to pay attention to how power is organized in our daily lives. Who has the power at your workplace? Who is at the head and who is at the bottom? Who are the replaceable people? Maybe that's you. Or maybe it's someone under your authority. You may be one rung up the ladder from a number of other people. What would it mean for you to give the people at the bottom the most honor, to affirm the goodness of their creation, of their being?

The good news is that Christ has come to dismantle our hierarchies of power. No one is more special than another; everyone is an absolutely necessary gift from God. And if you need some way to rank someone's importance to the community, then consider how the most vulnerable part of the body is the most necessary member. We give the greatest honor to the weakest among us. This is the case for us at church, in our worship services; and it should be the case in our everyday lives—at our work, in our politics and economics. We give the most attention to the forgotten members of society and our community, not the ones who put themselves in the spotlight and claim to have the power to change the world.

From my experience, I think you have made this church into a place that makes room for everyone to find their voices—even the weakest among us, people who usually never are given a chance to speak up, to offer the rest of us what they think God is saying. The shape of our worship shows us that every person is important—God can speak good news through anyone here. That's what kept me coming back to church seven years ago. I had never been part of a worship service that made space for anyone to share. I don't think we acknowledge enough how risky it is to let anyone have the floor and share what's on her or his mind. No one can predict or control what another person will say. Every worship service is a risk—and that is good news: our time is full of newness, completely unpredictable newness. Who knows what may emerge in our midst this time?

But this is only the beginning. Our worship together is only the beginning of our week. How will you honor the lesser members? How will you share with them the good news of what God is creating: a new people that finds ways to honor the dishonored.

Lingering thoughts:

- 1) We cannot objectify the weak among us. There is something wrong with looking around for weak people and figuring how to care for them. Weakness can't be a static, definable, identity. It's something discovered through friendship—and the weakness we find in another helps us befriend our own weaknesses.
- 2) When we receive the weak, they transform our body. We grow into their weakness; their weakness is shared, offered as a spiritual gift to the rest of us. To receive someone who is weak as an equal instead of inserting her or him into a master-slave relationships, requires that we ourselves become weak. Only the weak know how to receive the weak. Only Jesus can receive the weak without overpowering them. The cruciform life is the weak life that becomes good news to the weak.
- 3) How do we become weak? Weakness is the way your presence makes room for someone else to be who they are—without prerequisites, without pretention, without illusion, without facades. Weakness is the way your presence invites someone to emerge, to become more human, to be the creature God loved into existence. Weakness is about embodying a disposition of welcome, of invitation, of letting someone just be, without any need to impress you or win you over. Because you are already on their side. That's weakness: to show someone that you are on their side, and they can simply be who they are, the one who God loves.
- 4) Why exactly are the weak necessary to the health of the body?