

Honoring the Body

How many times have you washed your hands already this morning? It's been three times for me so far. Yesterday I thought I'd keep a tally for the entire day, just for the sake of counting. The total was 13.

Like most people, I have been paying a lot more attention to my hands in recent months. The palms, the back of the hands, each finger, the space between the fingers, and the thumbs—I spend a lot more time taking care of my hands than I used to. And increased attention has made me appreciate the amazing gift of hands.

But it's not just my hands that I feel grateful for. I have also been rediscovering the value of my feet. My feet have been taking me on walks through our neighborhood to some of the urban trails through fields and woods, by streams and ponds, to see the signs of spring in budding leaves and flowers, and the activities of birds and animals. I give thanks to my feet.

My feet have also been a great gift to my brain. Ordinarily we might think of our brains as the most important organ, the command center. The brain tells the feet to take steps. It registers warnings—avoid that puddle, or pay attention to that twinge in the ankle and slow down. But in this crazy time, my feet have exerted a calming influence on my overworked brain. Walks have restored my ability to think clearly and creatively. Because rhythmic activities reduce the anxiety responses of the brain, it's really good to walk.

One more body part to be grateful for in this time—my lungs. This disease which is exerting so much influence in our lives manifests in the lungs. Breathing is ordinarily an autonomic function, we don't have to think about it to do it. But focusing on our breathing, being mindful of how air sustains our very life, gives peace. I am grateful to my lungs for oxygenating my blood, which flows through my entire body thanks to the pumping of my heart, supplying all my cells with fuel, and carting off waste to be filtered by my kidneys, and so on and so on!

No body part can exist on its own, because every part of the body depends on every other part of the body. Not only is the toe bone connected to the foot bone, the heel bone, the ankle bone, the shin bone, the knee bone, the thigh bone, the hip bone, the shoulder bone, the neck bone, and to the head bone, but all the muscles and tendons and ligaments and skin hold them all together! The human body is an extraordinary creation.

And it was as a human body that God showed us Godself. Jesus also had lungs and a brain, feet and hands, a heart that pumped blood and a stomach that growled when he was hungry.

So when Paul calls the church the "body of Christ," he is saying much more than "this is a good metaphor for how this organization works." Think for a moment about the incarnation of Christ. If the fullness of God's love for the world was embodied in Jesus Christ, if God "so loved the world that he gave his only Son," then God honored the human body by becoming a human person in a human body. And naming us, the community of faith gathered around Jesus, as Christ's BODY honors us and gives us a purpose and responsibility unlike any other human organization.

And I am convinced that as Christ's body we have everything we need to fulfill our calling, carrying out Christ's ministry of showing the fullness of God's love for the world.

Even in a pandemic. Even when we are limited in our ability to gather physically with one another. Even when we aren't sure how long this will last, or when it return, or who will suffer and who will survive, or what the post-pandemic world will look like, or what will happen to the economy. We are the Body of Christ, which is so much more than a club or a collection of like-minded individuals or a community organization.

And not only does God give us everything we need to fulfill our calling, but I believe God also gives us what the world around us needs to get through this challenging time.

In these past few months, I have seen the strength and interdependence of the body of Christ in action as we scrambled to adjust the ways we fulfill our mission in this new environment. Let me illustrate with some "not only's." Not only did the Session appoint a Pandemic Response Team of diverse persons with varied gifts, but that team quickly came together and has worked week after week to stay abreast of developments and plan for what happens next. Not only did a worship team of staff and volunteers emerge, but God gave this team a readiness to learn and lead. We've been discovering treasures in our worship archives of recorded music. Absent from the beauty of our traditional sanctuary, we've been free to explore visual additions to worship which we are committed to continue. And not only did this team dare to try new technologies for worship, but the congregation has also dared to go along with us. Not only have so many of you remained faithful in your financial pledges to the work of the church, but members of the Finance Committee have creatively tapped into other revenue sources which are helping us continue our mission. Not only did the Board of Deacons initiate a telephone web of caring for one another, but virtually the entire congregation became included in the web. And let me say why we call it a "web" rather than a traditional telephone "tree." A tree branches outward to its tips, and that's a useful image for disseminating information, but it flows in one direction only. A web is multidirectional, interdependent, and non-hierarchical. It's much more like the Body of Christ, where love and care flow in many directions. And a final "not only" – not only have the organized prayers of the church's prayer chains continued, but the prayers of all have doubled down and the Holy Spirit has bound us together as one body.

Indeed, we are the body of Christ and individually members of him. In these difficult days, we already have what the world needs, so we are called to share that with the world. For one, we have connection, even in this time of physical distancing. The most recent book of New York Times columnist David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*, reflects on the rise in loneliness, depression, suicide, and addiction in our culture. He ties these negative trends to the disconnection fostered by our "culture of individualism," "a culture that says, 'You are what you accomplish.'" (<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/conversations/current-conversation>, 5/13/2020) But the body of Christ is connected, interdependent, a community with strong ties binding us together. We are related to one another in this body.

Secondly, we have commitment to something much bigger than ourselves. Becoming a Christian, we learn from Jesus, means losing your life to find it, shedding your ego, giving up yourself for others, learning that suffering has something to teach us and one of the things it teaches is that joy springs out of love, not out of self-gratification. Commitment to others, and commitment to God, gives our lives purpose. We have a mission, and it's not our own. It is Christ's mission of love and justice. To this we are committed.

And third, we have in this body of Christ something the world desperately needs right now. That something is hope. Hope sees beyond the immediate landscape to the horizon where God is saying, "I'm over here! Keep coming toward me!" Hope encourages the researcher who is seeking a cure for disease. Hope heartens the family who grieve their loved one. Hope strengthens the laid-off worker or the business owner who has taken a big loss. Hope motivates the community or state or nation to imagine new ways of doing things which could make us emerge from this with a more just and sustainable society. Hope is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who lives in and animates the body of Christ.

The world needs connection, commitment, and hope, three of the many gifts of being the body of Christ. This pandemic has exposed the need; we see an opportunity to fulfill our mission of carrying out Christ's ministry of showing the fullness of God's love for the world.

So we wash our hands—and use them to feed others, to make masks, to provide shelter, and to serve others.

We use our feet—to walk gently on the earth, to march for justice, and to dance with joy at all the gifts of life.

We exercise our brains—to solve problems for the good of all, to invent and imagine and create new patterns of living in God's way.

And we breathe in, and breathe out, praising God for the Spirit's presence in our bodies until we take our last breath and entrust our eternal life to Christ.

May we honor the bodies of all persons, whether they are young or old, familiar or strange to us, dressed in brown skin or black skin or pale skin, of every gender or sexuality, to nurture health in all. For by doing so, we will be living as the body of Christ.