

“Interdependent”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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1 Corinthians 12:12-27

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

There's a famous rabbi known as Simeon ben Yohai, who, long ago, wanted to explain one particularly difficult passage of Scripture. The passage was Leviticus, chapter four. It says that many may suffer because of the one. Unfortunately, this rabbi did not have access to “The Wrath of Khan” and to that make-you-cry-like-a-baby moment when Spock dies. (Gets me every time!) So he told a parable instead. It went something like this: some men were sailing on a ship, when one of them began drilling a hole into his part of the ship. The other men rushed over, screaming, “What are you doing?” He said to them, “What does it matter to you? I'm not drilling your part of the ship, just mine.” They shouted, “Because the water will come up and flood the ship for us all!”

We are this man. We are the guy drilling a hole in the boat, insisting that it's no one else's business but ours, because it's our life, it's our corner of the boat. We are him every time we insist on going our own way, regardless of how it affects others.

To be clear, the man wasn't wrong in recognizing that his part of the ship was different from the rest. His sense of individuality was not the problem. Every child has to learn to distinguish between what is me and what is not me. Everything from spatial movement to language to culture depends on this capacity to identify differences. After all, God created a world that is incredibly diverse. Uniformity has never been God's goal.

The problem was that this man believed his part of the ship to be independent, disconnected, from the rest.

It's this idea of separation that so often takes over our lives and leads to envy, competition, anger, judgment, and hate. We end up slamming the door on someone else, shutting them out, not knowing that when we do so, we shut the door on ourselves.

We sink the boat.

Paul writes to the Corinthians because their boat is sinking too. They've been arguing about whose spiritual gifts, whose jobs, whose stations in life, were superior. They've started looking down on some of their own.

In response, Paul compares the human community to a body. A body, he says, has different parts with different functions. The Corinthians have gotten that much right. They've recognized the diversity among them. Some of them are teachers, others are healers, others community leaders or prophets or helpers.

What they have failed to understand, however, is that all these varied parts are equally connected and necessary to one another. No part is subordinate to another. Neither can any part say to another that it has no need of it. In fact, what happens to one part happens to all. In this body, each part grieves when one grieves; each part rejoices when one part rejoices.

Paul says that we are part of a community, of an existence, that is interdependent. We are not the same, and that's good. But what's also good is that we are united for common purpose, and in common need. I cannot live, or love, or know God, without you. Because you are a part of the same divine fabric that I am. You are a part of Christ, and there is no Christ for me without you.

Take a moment to absorb the radicality of that statement. Here Christ isn't simply the head of the body (as he is, for instance, in Colossians); here he is the body itself. He is the ship in which we sail. And in him, as is written in Acts, "we live and move and have our being" (17:28). Each of us belongs to *soma Christou*, the body of Christ.

And in this body, what's even more radical is that each part has equal value, equal dignity. In fact, those parts which are mistreated or vulnerable, they're the parts that need the most care and respect. It's the sores part of your body that needs that soothing massage, not the most privileged and comfortable.

This might seem obvious to some of us, but it was revolutionary in Paul's time. Paul wasn't the first to compare human society to a body. The Romans had been doing it for centuries. But for them, this body was all about the hierarchy, all about some parts being more important, more privileged, more necessary, than other parts. The ruling class was the brain, the center; they were in control; they were the most important. The lower class, the laborers, they were the hands and feet, made to do all the hard and dirty work. In that body, the weaker served the stronger. So consider how subversive it was for Paul to say that the head cannot say to the feet, "I have no need of you" (1 Cor. 12:21). And hear again a revolution when Paul says that the parts of the body that seem weak and disposable, they are the parts—they are the people—who deserve the greatest honor and respect. They are indispensable and should be clothed with power and dignity.

Because there is no body without them.

Paul isn't just prescribing a nice-sounding ideal. He is describing reality. It's all the people drilling the boat, convinced of their own independence, who are delusional.

This is how our world works. From ecosystems, to families and societies, to the laws of physics, we are interconnected in a causal framework, where what happens to one affects us all. And those who know it, thrive.

Consider this story:

There was a farmer who grew excellent quality corn. Every year he won the award for the best grown corn. One year a newspaper reporter interviewed him and learned something interesting about how he grew it. The reporter discovered that the farmer shared his seed corn with his neighbors. "How can you afford to share your best seed

corn with your neighbors when they are entering corn in competition with yours each year?" the reporter asked.

"Why sir," said the farmer, "Didn't you know? The wind picks up pollen from the ripening corn and swirls it from field to field. If my neighbors grow inferior corn, cross-pollination will steadily degrade the quality of my corn. If I am to grow good corn, I must help my neighbors grow good corn."

So it is with our lives... Those who want to live meaningfully and well must help enrich the lives of others, for the value of a life is measured by the lives it touches. And those who choose to be happy must help others find happiness, for the welfare of each is bound up with the welfare of all. (Stephen Kaczor)

Knowing this means refusing to write someone off, refusing to give up on them, to hate them, to wish them ill. It means sitting beside the dying, because a part of you is in that hospital bed too. It means bringing food to the hungry, because *you* are hungry. It means challenging any system, any idea, any action, that insists on the independence and superiority of one people over another. It means being good Presbyterians, and gathering together as equal ministers of God's word, in our annual meeting today, to discuss and discern together the future of the church.

It's what we say every All Saints Sunday, quoting John Donne: "No person is an island entire of itself; every person is a piece of the continent, a part of the main... any person's death diminishes me, because I am involved in humankind."

Each of you was given a notecard as you entered. If you did not receive one, raise your hand and an usher can bring one to you now. I invite you to write a brief prayer, maybe even just a word. Something you need help with. Something that's hurting you, or a joy that needs celebrating. Write it down, but don't write your name. I ask that you place this card in the offering plate later in the service. When you leave, an usher will hand you a card. Each of you will receive someone else's prayer, someone else's need, hurt, or hope, without knowing to whom it belongs. I ask that you say this prayer every day for the next month, as if it were your own. Because in the end, it is your own.

Through us all courses divinity, God, binding us together, spilling the fire of imagination, of passion, of life, of love. We are not separate little beings scurrying across this life, surviving, competing. We are parts of the whole, pieces of one another, of God, of the *soma Christou*. Fragments desperate to be put back together again. We are one. **Amen.**