"What the Body Will Allow"
Text: 1 Corinthians 12: 12-27
Preached: January 21, 2007
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Rev. Broadbent:

In this portion of Paul's letter, he addresses the paradox of what it means to be of one body and yet many members. He points to baptism as that which confirms that we are of one body. But then he goes on to describe, in somewhat absurd language, what it means if in being baptized we all became the same member, exactly the same, performing exactly the same function. Now this was a very common metaphor in the Roman culture. It was often used to explain how a community can be of one mind, so to speak, and yet have individual participation in that commonality.

And it is almost comical when he says, you know, "If the whole body were an eye, then where would the hearing be?" And you can imagine this big eyeball just sitting all by itself. "If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?" And you think of just a big ear, dismembered from the rest of its body. But those members only make sense in their participation as part of a larger body.

The commentators that I read on this passage went to great pains to point out that this is more than a metaphor, as it has been received within the Christian church. In other words, it is saying more than, "Well, when we come together as one body, everybody has their own part. We're just like a human body." It goes even a step further to say that we have become Christ's body.

It reminds us of St. Theresa's prayer. "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands. No feet on earth but yours. No eyes with which to look compassion on the world. Christ has no body now, but yours." That is a radical notion that we, as the church, are the embodiment of Christ in the world. We are to be his servant, feet, and hands. His eyes gazing lovingly on the world that so much needs to be loved.

You can understand why this passage is appropriate on Ecumenical Sunday, because we are to contemplate not just our participation in this community of faith, this outpost of the Christian faith on the corner of Tejon and St. Vrain, but our participation in the body of Christ, which is global cosmic. And that while we may find ourselves not always agreeing with one another, nonetheless, if we believe that Christ's love is universal, and what is it if it is not, then we belong even to those with whom we might have the greatest disagreements. That is easy to say; it is very difficult to live.

Well, I am also mindful, as I am every year on this equivalent Sunday, that tomorrow is the 33rd anniversary of the Roe vs. Wade decision. I do not know

whether there will be other sermons preached on reproductive rights, but I assume that in Colorado Springs, most of those sermons would be condemning of some reproductive decisions. This is one of those issues that for me I feel has chosen me rather than my choosing it. I feel a certain way, but I also in various ways have felt compelled in my heart but also compelled from without to speak about this. And what I want to say before I begin is that what I am not doing is telling you that God feels a certain way about this issue. I am not telling you that there is one decision and only one way to read this issue that can be found in the Bible or elsewhere, and I am not trying to convince you of that one way. I am expressing to you an opinion, which means that for me personally I believe that I am forming it as honestly and as rightly as I can, and I present it to you as a member of the body so that as a body we can engage in a dialogue, because the way that reproductive rights, namely and most specifically the right for a woman to choose to terminate a pregnancy, suffers from a, I think, far too black and white conversation in our culture. It is far too stark and far too simplistic. So, as somebody who identifies himself as pro-choice, I am gong to try to even let go of my own intrenchiness in what I believe as true and try to suggest how it might be that we would have a fuller conversation about what it means to grant a woman the decision to terminate her pregnancy.

Speaking of black and white ways of seeing things, there is a billboard on, I think it is Wahsatch, as you are driving north, just here in the downtown area that says in huge letters, “Abortion is always wrong—God.” Now I do not know if they are drawing that from the Bible or from some other source, but you could not, I don't think, draw that conclusion from the Bible. In fact, the Bible makes a case for a very violent and ritualistic and male-centered form of medical abortion. We find it in the Book of Leviticus, which states that if a man suspects that his wife has slept with another man and has become pregnant because of it he may bring her to the priest. Now this is in the Bible, and he can make a concoction using among other things dust from the floor of the temple itself, and they coerce her to drink this. If it causes her to have a miscarriage, then it has proven that she has been unfaithful, and she should be put to death. If it does not cause her to have a miscarriage, well, then she must not have been unfaithful, and everything is fine.

Now I am not an expert on this passage, but I do not think this is something we should follow. I also do not think that it should be stricken from the Bible, because I think the Bible is, in many ways, messy; and there is stuff in there that we frankly do not want to follow and do not want to do. Does this mean we should just pick and choose the kinds of things we want to do? I don’t think that either. I actually think we must look at the overall spirit and thrust of the entire narrative, both of the Hebrew Scriptures and also of the Christian scriptures. I think that we will find hidden in there, even amidst these very

disturbing kinds of stories, like the one I just shared, the overarching message of liberation and salvation and a new way.

One reason I believe scripture to be true is that despite the fact that it is shot through with sexism, racism, and nationalism, among other things, there are always these liberating stories that are hidden in there. Consider the women of the Bible. The women of the Bible who are considered the most heroic are those women who act, frankly, shrewdly. And act shrewdly with regard to reproduction and their fertility. Consider Ruth, who seduces Boaz in order to carry on the line and look after herself and her mother-in-law. Consider Rahab. the prostitute, and the way that she becomes pregnant by coercion in order to make a similar point. So that, the women who are considered heroic are those who take charge of their fertility, act shrewdly, and act in contradiction to the social expectations of them.

So the overarching message is that hidden within the structures and the strictures of our religious traditions are people who make the best decisions they can in their real context. And this has not changed. This is still the case.

Women can be trusted as moral agents. I believe this is a Biblical notion. It is even hidden in the story of Genesis. Consider that before the fall Adam and Eve were not referred to as man and woman. They were partners. And there is no indication that Adam was in any way the head of Eve. They walked in the Garden together. They shared what was there. The Lord himself walked in the Garden with them. There was no distinction, no boundary, and no power imbalance.

And then the fall happened, and, of course, one major misconception in the history of Christianity was that it was the woman's fault, right. The man even tries to blame it on her a little bit later. But the truth is that when presented with the fruit, both of them make a decision on their own. The woman, when offered the fruit by the serpent does not say, "Well, I have to go check with my husband and make sure it's okay with him." She takes of the fruit, and he does the same. He does not get off the hook. He makes his own decision. It is only after the fall that Eve is referred to as woman, the word meaning even in English "of man, from man," that she is told that she must now suffer the pains of labor and that Adam is to be the head of her. And so we can conclude that a result of the fall is this gender imbalance, which persists to today.

It even persists in this first to the Corinthians, just a few, actually the chapter before the one that Dell read us. Paul talks about the importance of women wearing head coverings in church. Let's see, Sarah has her hat on. The rest of you — sorry.

And the fact that women are not to speak in church. So if we are looking to Paul for some sense of a liberating feminist theology that can guide us today, we will be disappointed. But, and here is my point again, that even in scripture, even with sexist Paul, we have these words that Dell read, this notion that we belong to each other as the various members of one body, seeking together to have the mind of Christ. Not only that, but those who are considered lesser or weaker are to be given the greater honor. In the history of gender relations, who has been considered the lesser or the weaker? Women are to be given even the greater honor, maybe even to make up for thousands of years of patriarchal oppression and to affirm once again that women are human, that women can make moral decisions and should be trusted to do so.

One quote I like is that women have always made, over history, good decisions about life. I think they can be trusted with making those kinds of decisions around their own bodies and their fertility and their own reproduction. To give greater honor and to have, as this variety of members of one body, the same mind, namely the mind of Christ. Now what does that mean? I am not going to be able to tell you definitively what that means, but I know what it does not mean. It does not mean figuring what political banner to fly.

Christ does not fly a political banner that says, "Get under this one, or you're out." The mind of Christ is neither so-called pro-choice or so-called pro-life. The mind of Christ always seeks unity, and to find another way, to find a way where we thought there was no way. The only way I can conceive of that with regard to this issue is to say this, that can we come together and find and create together a world where both women and men are granted the moral agency and freedom to make decisions, but we also do not neglect to work toward a societal situation where fewer and fewer people would feel, fewer women would feel, that they would even ever want to consider terminating a pregnancy.

I do not think the need would ever be eradicated. There are health issues, and we are a broken world, so our decisions will always be messy. But I think what happens is that the pro-choice people on the one hand say, "A woman should always be given the choice, and we should never question it, and it's entirely up to them. End of story." But then they forget about creating a social situation where there is adequate health care and support for families and for single women, creating an atmosphere where you would never even need to ask this question about whether to terminate a pregnancy.

Meanwhile, my sense is that the pro-life folk say, "No, a woman should never be able to make that decision. It's tantamount to murder." But they also are not working to create the conditions wherein every pregnancy would be a wanted pregnancy.

So, again, I think just to conclude, speaking as someone who has found himself on that pro-choice side and who has even found himself having that kind of radical view of it as a totally moral decision, we should just leave them alone. What I see as possibility in the middle is working toward creating the social condition where fewer abortions would even be necessary.

I was reading that Holland, a country where contraception is widely available, where abortion is not only legal but also covered by insurance, which is universal health insurance to the entire populace, has the lowest abortion rate in the entire world. I think our common goal should be fewer unwanted pregnancies so that we can fully celebrate those babies who are born with their families so that they would not become a health risk or an economic burden to the women who have them. I think women can be trusted with this.

So my prayer is that together, even though we might disagree on some of these issues, that we would seek together to hold of one mind, the mind of Christ, even as we are all individually members of Christ's own body.

Amen.