Third Sunday after the Epiphany All Saints’ Church/Annual Meeting

January 27, 2019 Year C

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Psalm 19 Luke 4:14-21

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable

in your sight O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Saint Paul, in his letter, is speaking to the people of Corinth in the year 54 AD. He could be speaking to us, here in America in 2019.

Corinth was one of the most flourishing cities of the ancient world. And Corinthians for the most part were affluent, thriving in their capacity to trade and to be at a crossroad between the West and the East. Corinth was bursting at the seams with different nationalities and ethnicities. Cosmopolitan in its make-up, Corinth was Jewish, Greek, Roman, and People following the Way, who would later become known as Christians. Many citizens were rich and entitled, others laborers and home-makers. And yes, there were the poor, widows, slaves, the uneducated, and the sick. Of course! The full array.

And Paul is speaking to all of them, trying to create one community amidst all this wild diversity. And he’s struggling; *such a new idea* that different people of different strokes could actually become One in communion. Yes, Corinth was cosmopolitan, but these different groups kept to themselves, within little apartheid affinity groups.

Paul is relying on a well-known Greek rhetorical tool that used the body parts to reinforce the well-established and respected hierarchy. Everyone knew that the head and heart and eye symbolized the rich, the royals, and those in power. And the feet, knees, and digestive system symbolized the poor, women, slaves, and the disenfranchised. Of course!

So Paul, in his brilliance, is taking a well-known trope and turning it on its head to challenge the status quo of who belongs and who doesn’t. Of who’s significant and who’s not. In other words, he’s being sarcastic, confronting the arrogance of the “important people.”

“If the foot would say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body?’” (no sense).

“If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be?” (good question).

“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 indispensable.”

Think of your own body parts. Are there some that you love more than others? Some that you are constantly critiquing, wishing you could change. Some that you rely on as your strength. I know that I like to think of myself as an intellectual. Someone who relishes the life of my mind. But I know this. It was my knees that got me to college.

I was 15, taking up tennis as my new sport. I loved the game. I was a hacker, not a very polished player, but I was on the courts all day long, picking up a game whenever I could. I have vivid memories of buying my first racquet at Woolworths for $2.99. I arrived at the courts every day in boat shoes, long white knee socks, gym shorts, and a white polo t-shirt with no collar and the pocket on the left side. And I played, badly, but I played.

And during gym class, I watched with much reverence the best tennis player in the region who was so smooth, with gorgeous strokes. I was so envious. And then one day in May, she came and sat next to me in the bleachers and asked me if I would be her tennis partner for the summer circuit of Junior Davis Competition. I was really hurt. I was so out of her league, I thought she was making fun of me. I told her to go away.

She told me that she was serious. I asked her, “Have you seen me play?”

“Exactly.” And then she pointed to my knees. “Your knees are all scraped up because you dive for balls. I want a partner who dives for balls.”

“Yeah, I dive for balls, but I don’t play very well.”

“I can teach you how to play tennis; that’s easy. I can’t teach you how to dive. I love your knees. Please, be my partner. I need you.” She was 14.

We played together for two summers, and we did pretty well on the circuit. And I was introduced to a world of tournament travel, dinner parties at tennis clubs, the New York Times, political discussions, book reviews, the op-ed page, entrepreneurial ideas, and the privilege of believing that with effort anything was possible. (So many take this belief for granted). In other words, I was given access to a world I had no idea existed. And it was my scraped up, bloody knees that got me there. After those two summers, you couldn’t keep me out of college.

Paul believes that we need each other. Especially those deemed “weaker.” That by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, we can create healthy and thriving communion with each other, not in spite of our differences, but because of them. We can’t survive held up in our own little apartheid affinity groups, walled off from each other. “God has so arranged the body, that there can be no dissension within the body.” Because, literally, you won’t survive that way.

Just as the body has to work together, so does our society. Paul gives us a hint of where to begin, “Those members of the body that we think less honorable, we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect.”

Maybe we should conjure up Saint Paul and send him packing to Washington. He’d have a lot to say about the dignity of work, a living wage, and the relentless anxiety too many Americans have that they are only a couple of paychecks away from being evicted from their home. If we had any doubt, this last month has revealed the fragility of our economic system.

The Government Shut-down is over, at least for now, but with Paul as our guide, we as Christians can witness in our public lives together, that “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”

Isn’t that the whole point of church? To have the courage to believe that our love for each other is essential. Isn’t that why Jesus died? Isn’t that why we worship and pray and serve, and believe that as the Body of Christ we can be a salve for the world and be a witness that each one of us is indispensable? Isn’t this what we are celebrating today at our Annual Meeting.

Last Sunday in the middle of our snow storm, we held church and seventeen people came to our 10:00 service in the Lady’s Chapel. Guess who came. Out of that seventeen, we had one Muslim, two Mormon missionaries, a Unitarian, a Greek Orthodox, a secular humanist and a smattering of Episcopalians.

What a perfect gathering to represent the Body of Christ.

Yes, as the Body of Christ, we are the full array. Republican, Democrat, Socialist, liberal, conservative, men, women, gay, straight, trans, black, white, brown, laborers, immigrants, professionals, home-makers, retired, with a variety of economic power, education, health, and mobility. And we need each other. Each one of us is indispensable.

Yes, this great mix is the Body of Christ. And, as the Body of Christ, we have been anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

And we’ve been anointed to have the hutzpah to believe, by the Grace of God, we can fulfill this hope. AMEN