

## **One Body** **January 23, 2022**

My parents have a dog. Her name is Essen. She is a large dog; a giant schnauzer. She is by-and-large a good dog, but every animal has their little quirks. Essen the dog is, as my sister-in-law put it recently, missing a few marbles. She hasn't lost all of her marbles, but she sure isn't working with a complete set.

One example of this occurs when Essen is excited. She will be lying down, chewing on a bone or a toy, and she gets a little protective of her prize. Sometimes, she'll bark if she perceives there's a threat (whether there is or not). When she barks, her back foot moves a little bit.

Essen then sees her foot move, and she thinks her foot is sneaking up to steal her bone, so she bites it. Really, she attacks it. And after a few seconds of biting, she realizes that the foot is in fact, firmly attached to her and is sending sensations of pain to her brain.

So she stops... for a few minutes. Five minutes later, she'll bark again, her foot moves, and she attacks again.

It's like a dog chasing its tail, but with more head-shaking. Not the brightest bulb in the pack.

That's an image that speaks to Paul's message today from 1 Corinthians. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head [or the mouth] to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'"

It just doesn't work. It is a lesson that Essen the dog is still learning.

Paul is writing to Christians in Corinth, which is in modern-day Greece. It appears that the Christian community in that area was dealing with arguments, conflict, people fighting over who was the best leader and should be in charge, and mistreating or belittling people who were different. Clearly, human beings haven't changed much.

Paul's response is to call for unity amid diversity. And being unified looked like, he says, being a part of a human body. There are many different parts, and you need all those differentiated body parts – eyes, ears, nose, mouth; head, torso, limbs. If there were no diversity, you wouldn't be alive. Makes sense.

And here's the key, if you hurt one part of the person, the whole body suffers. The foot can't get mad and step on a finger because that hurts the whole person. You can't bite your foot because it's getting too close to your bone. Paul writes, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

That's a piece that Essen the dog hasn't learned, but it's also a truth that we as a society struggle with. We like our individual choices. "I do what's right for me." "This is my truth." Going further, we can demonize others, who think, look, vote, or operate differently than we do. We are an intensely individualistic society.

And that has, in more recent times, entered into our faith language. “Have you accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior?” Salvation in that case seems to be a private matter between you and God.

Or there’s the old story of a preacher who tells an atheist, “You can’t tell me there’s no Jesus because you don’t know MY Jesus.”

What is worth remembering is that faith is meant to be lived in community. As Paul says, we are a part of one body. We can’t say to others, “I don’t need you.” We do, in fact, need one another to survive. In our service of Compline, we pray, “Grant that we may never forget that our common life depends upon each other’s toil.” (BCP 134)

Jesus shows us this in the Gospel too. Today we hear about Jesus’ first public appearance in Luke’s Gospel. He reads from Scripture and preaches in the synagogue, which was something traveling religious leaders often did.

To introduce his ministry, Jesus chooses a particular text. He wants to give everyone an idea of what the next couple years of his life will look like, so he reads from Isaiah. “God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, freedom to prisoners and the oppressed, healing to the blind, and good news of God’s love.”

None of those things can be done in solitude. Jesus did not say, “I’ve come so that people can have a private relationship with me so that they know they’ll go to heaven when they die.”

No, Jesus’ ministry is about improving the lives of others. Healing, preaching love, teaching, bringing about freedom are communal acts.

And that speaks to us. It’s great to come to church; it’s good to have a relationship with God. What matters more though, is to live out that relationship with God in interactions and relationships with other people.

And that’s hard, to operate in a community where other people are different than us. But it’s also what helps us grow. Community smooths our rough edges, like stones in a bucket together.

Believe it or not, the Episcopal Church is set up around this idea of community. We’re a part of the Anglican Church, which spans all over the world. And every 10 years or so, there is a global gathering of Anglican leaders. And at these meetings, there are arguments and disagreements. Even church folks don’t always get along. But they keep meeting (and disagreeing), because they believe that community is essential for faith.

We believe that on a smaller scale as well. We have a Book of Common Prayer, meant to be used in a communal setting. In our prayers, we don’t have private confession; we don’t have personal statements of faith. We say a communal confession of sin – “We have sinned against you.” We have a communal creed – “We believe in one God…” Before Covid, we had a

common cup of wine, that everyone drank out of. We baptize folks not as an assurance of personal salvation, but as a celebration into the family of God, their church community.

Our whole worship and belief system, our ethos is centered around community. Not because it's easy or neat, but because Jesus placed himself in the midst of communities to preach, teach, and heal.

Now to be clear, it's good to have clear personal boundaries and to say, "I can only control my actions, not the actions of others." But there's a difference between having healthy personal boundaries in the midst of community, versus living an entirely individualized existence (and faith).

So the next time you get in an debate with someone (a spouse, a friend, a relative), once you've cooled down a little bit, chew on that conversation to see if you've grown a bit. That debate is a sign of community, that you are engaged, that you are passionate, and that your sharp edges are being worn smooth. And that community is helping you living into your call to be a disciple of Jesus.

I'll close with a short piece of writing from Martin Luther King, Jr's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, which looks at this idea of communal relationships.

**"We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."**

Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." 1963. [https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/\\_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf](https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf) (Accessed January 21, 2022).

Dr. King dreamed of the world becoming a beloved community, a community where all people are respected, cared for, and treated as equals. That is an idea that goes back all the way to Paul, writing about one body, and even back to Jesus himself.

Amen.

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