

aren't yet sure. In the other direction, a few cells from the mother are transferred into the fetus, too, where they persist into adulthood. This is not an occasional phenomenon; it occurs for everyone. It's called microchimerism. As Katherine J. Wu reports, "Some researchers believe that people may be miniature mosaics of many of their relatives, via chains of pregnancy: their older siblings, perhaps, or their maternal grandmother, or any aunts and uncles their grandmother might have conceived before their mother was born. 'It's like you carry your entire family inside of you,'" one biologist says.²

In Christ's body, we carry pieces of each other around with us, something like those cells. Whether or not a microscope would reveal it, our interactions in worship and service and care for each other mean that we exchange pieces of ourselves. So you get to hold and care for those pieces of me, as I do for you. Another microchimerism researcher says of this transfer of cells, "it does alter my concept of who I am."³

People who are interdependent and interconnected as we are, can no longer think of themselves as totally separate from the community or as the center of things. We are not just individuals who create our own lives or live by our own choices. Through baptism and fellowship and worship in the Christian community, we become so connected that we carry pieces of each other around in our hearts and minds and through our actions. That does alter our concept of self. Through the Spirit, we are connected in ways that sometimes we can hardly understand, but that can be felt deep inside. That means I don't just belong to me. I also belong to you. And together, we belong to God. Our lives mutually impact each other. And the purpose of our connection is especially so that we care for one another, regardless of our status, or whether we deserve it, or whether we can give anything in return. We suffer together and we rejoice together. So, with humility and assurance, relying on our connectedness, we can make our way even through the strongest storms.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

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Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Connections: Navigating the Storm Together

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

The church members in Corinth were in the middle of a storm. They were not getting along. They were arguing about everything: relationships, who had the most important gifts, whether you could eat meat offered to idols, abuses in the Lord's Supper, and controversy about the resurrection. Things were not well in their community. They didn't know how to get along and they didn't know how to resolve their disputes. Paul knew he needed to get back to the city and be with them in order to help work these issues out. The instruction in this letter was a stop-gap measure meant to hold them over until he could travel back to Corinth.

His letter had advice about many of their stormy issues. What we read today was advice for their argument about spiritual gifts and whose were most important. But it could also be considered general advice for navigating our way through any storm. It offers ideas for how to treat each other while we argue. For how we ought to listen while we work things out. And it reminds us of the bigger picture: who are *we* as we try to make our way through hard times? What resources do we have to support us through our storms?

Paul compared the Corinthians' Christian community to a body. This metaphor of the community as a body feels like old news to most churchgoers who've been around the block a few times. At first, it probably felt like old news to the Corinthians, too. They had heard this analogy lots of times in the rhetoric of their day; it had already been in use a long time by the time Paul wrote it down. The analogy went that a diversity of people—as in, different body parts—are needed to make the world go round—to let the body function properly. The various parts rely on each other to operate and they all have a role to play. In ancient thinking, though, some roles were more important, meant to be honored and worthy of status, while others were not. For example, the stomach was used to represent the highest classes, while other body parts represented lower class workers whose labor fed the belly. Then, so the analogy went, the belly distributed

1 Dale. B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 92.

2 Katherine J. Wu, "The Most Mysterious Cells in Our Body Don't Belong to Us," *The Atlantic*, January 3, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4lPEYBP>

3 Qtd. in Wu.

that nourishment back to all the other parts of the body. People said this was the way things were supposed to be. As Dale B. Martin writes, in Paul's time, "the analogy [of the body] usually functioned conservatively to support hierarchy and to argue that inequality is both necessary and salutary," or beneficial.¹

But Paul used the analogy in a different way. When he said, "you are the body of *Christ*," he urged the Corinthians to take a radically opposite view about the hierarchy and interdependence in their community. He said that the lower status members actually deserve *more* honor. The various, less important body parts are not meant to serve the more important parts; it's actually the heart and belly and brain who must honor the pinky toes, the appendix, the tonsils, and the knobby knees. Rather than maintaining the social order, Paul urged the Corinthians to blow it up completely in their interactions with one another. Their interdependence and diversity were meant to provide honor, worth, and care for everyone without regard to their status. God has arranged the body of the Christian community in order that all of us, together, can take good care of everyone.

When we're in the middle of a storm, we need the care of our community. Our storms all look different: stormy relationships, a stormy mind, decisions where there are no good options, health problems, major upheaval in the world. It's easy to withdraw and go to dark places when we're dealing with all that. And that's especially easy to do when we keep it all to ourselves and try to go it alone. But another way of saying what Paul said is, *in Christ*, no one is an island. Because we have been baptized into this community, we are never alone in dealing with our problems. We are each other's greatest resource for getting through our storms. Because the Spirit has already connected us, our presence here declares: "I do have need of you, and you, and you. And just the same, each of you needs me."

We understand the importance of those statements in our heads. I suspect we even believe them most of the time. But saying them out loud, meaning them, and living by them is much harder. It requires a little bit of humility and a little bit of self-confidence, neither of which are always easy to come by. To say that we need the support of the other people in this community, especially when we're going through some stuff, means we will need to be humble. Humble enough to share what's going on with us; humble enough to pull down our masks and say "I'm not ok. Things are not ok. I could use some support." Then, there's the other side of that coin—the self-confidence part. To state clearly that other people actually need us, too, feels close to egoism or having a big head. "Me? The other people here couldn't possibly need anything I can give. Surely someone else is smarter,

more faithful, closer to God, better equipped, better spoken, more reliable, than me. Surely there's someone else to step up here." But that's not Paul's image of the body. He says that everyone else really and truly needs you exactly as you are. We are called to have enough self-assurance to believe that. Whether you think of yourself as a brain or a heart, a bum shoulder or a stiff neck or a foot with a big wart on it, you are one of the many parts that other people need for support, strength, and compassion.

Living into our connections in these ways with humility and self-confidence is beautiful. And, it takes effort, growth, and sacrifice. We are the body of Christ; that's a given. But it's not a given that we will actually act in the interdependent ways Paul describes so that the body functions at its best. Doing that, even when it's challenging, is what makes connecting not just a nice thing, but an actual spiritual practice. Because when we're humble and admit we need the support of others, we're likely to receive some attention and some eyeballs on us and our situation, like it or not. We'll have to be a little bit vulnerable with people we know, and some we don't know as well. We'll have to accept that some folks don't say the right thing in response to our troubles. None of that is easy to deal with. Yet Paul says it is the way of Christian living. On the other side of things, supporting other people can feel good, but it also requires sacrifices on our part: giving time we may not have to listen to others; having their problems dig up our own issues so we have to face those too. Sometimes helping others puts us in conflict with our own families who don't necessarily want us giving our energy or resources in those ways. But our unity in Christ calls us, and maybe even requires us, to try to do these things anyway; to care for each other, despite the challenges. Because when one of us is hurting, then all of us are. When you're in the midst of a storm, the waves will be stirring up around the rest of us, too. And so together, we can call for all hands on deck. Together, one of us will have the binoculars to see the clouds ahead. Someone else knows how to study the star charts. Someone else can be at the helm. And together, we can steer the boat toward calmer seas.

Paul wanted us and the Corinthians to see that our connections to one another in Christ go far beyond just our obvious friendships and relationships. A discovery from science might help us grasp how deep those connections go. Scientists have proven that in mammals, cells from embryos dispatch themselves into the body housing them. During any pregnancy, no matter the outcome, fetal cells migrate out of the womb into the mother's lungs, heart, brain, kidneys and everywhere else. Then they stay there, continuing to grow and divide throughout the mother's life where they might impact behavior or autoimmune disease; scientists