

Better Together: Every Voice Matters

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I Corinthians 12:12-26

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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, and 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; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

1 Corinthians 12:12-26 (NRSV)

Let's pray together. *Gracious God open us up today. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts, God, that we might feel and then O Lord open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

I want you to imagine that you have gone down to Wortham to watch the symphony and on stage is the whole symphony orchestra, and they're huge, awesome. You can see all the instruments there. The percussionists in the back and the violins are up front and the conductor comes in and turns and does his little bow. Then he points to the first violinist, the concert master, who he also acknowledges and then he raises his baton and begins the symphony, and the only instrument that plays is the tuba. Just the tuba. You think the others are going to come in, but they don't, they just sit there. It's just the tuba playing for the first minute, then three minutes, then five minutes and pretty soon you're pretty annoyed, because you came to hear the symphony; you didn't come here to hear just the tuba. Now there's nothing wrong with the tuba but it's supposed to be a symphony.

Some of you are of my era (the rest of you can just ignore this) but there was a great classic "Saturday Night Live" skit with Christopher Walken and Will Farrell where they're trying to record. The band is supposed to be Blue Oyster Cult to record the great song, "The Reaper," and all Will Farrell wants to do is to play more cowbell and Walken says, "I need more cowbell – more cowbell!"

Well, what if it was only cowbell?

The point of this message and of this passage is that every voice matters. Every instrument matters, that the point of one instrument is not to drown out the other instruments.

Paul is speaking of the issues in the church. Let me just give you some background of the city of Corinth. He's writing to the Corinthians, probably from Ephesus, where Corinth is located, on an isthmus that separates parts of Greece. On the east of the isthmus is the Aegean Sea toward Asia and then on the west is the Mediterranean Sea and it's only six miles wide, with the Peloponnesus peninsula is below it. Ships could sail around that peninsula, but it was a long way. On that little tiny isthmus was the city of Corinth.

The city was Greek till 146 BC and then it was attacked and pillaged by the Romans and destroyed and no one lived in the city from 146 to 44 BC. Then in 44 BC the Romans reconstituted the city of Corinth as a Roman colony although there were still many Greeks who were living near there. It became a very important city, a cosmopolitan city, many believe it was also a decadent city though that could have been in earlier Greek times.

But the reason it was so important was they built a paved road across that isthmus and later they tried to build a canal. That failed and it wasn't until the 1800s that a canal was finally built there. But there was a paved road and it was an amazing engineering feat.

The ships would come in and they would actually have slaves lift the ships out of the water and set them on rollers. They'd roll it across this six-mile paved road so they could get to the other side. It was one of those deals where when they'd roll it the rollers in the back would come out and they'd carry them to the front and lay them out so the ship could keep going along. This was an amazing feat, and this was all done by slaves, so when slaves were doing that, what do you think the sailors were doing? They were partying in the city of Corinth. It was known as a wild city. So it was full of this diversity – this amazing mixture of Greek and Roman cultures together. There were Jews, gentiles and all sorts of folks. It was a wealthy city full of up-and-comers and was a very cosmopolitan place.

Now this diversity led to all sorts of challenges as you can imagine. And in the church at Corinth they struggled with the same kinds of issues. So all through Paul's letters to the Corinthians, he's challenging them about the divisions among them. He begins his letter saying, "I've heard from Chloe's people that there are divisions among you." I can imagine the letter being read aloud in the church and all the people looking at Chloe and her people, thinking, "You've tattled on us!" He says I've heard from Chloe's people that there are divisions among you. One faction says, "I follow Paul!" Another says, "I follow Apollos!" Another says, "I follow Cephas!" and another said, "I follow Christ," like "I'm one of those righteous people and I don't want to follow those others!" Later there were divisions over Jews and gentiles and whether gentiles had to convert to become Jews in order to follow Jesus.

Last week we talked about the divisions between the rich and the poor and how that was playing itself out in Corinth. In this passage, he's talking about the divisions that existed over issues of spiritual gifts. Over what matters to you, what your giftedness was, and what your passions were. What you believed in, how you pursued that.

In the church there are all different kinds of people. It goes this way. Somebody comes and says, "You know what matters most in church? It's worship. That's what we do every week and it's the heart of the church – worship. We need to invest in this. We need to invest in this beautiful room, in our music program, in our instruments. Worship is what we're all about – that's what the church really is!"

Then somebody else says, “What church is really about is the children because they’re the ones who are going to carry the faith into the next generation. So we absolutely have to form our children in the faith.” Then somebody else says, “No, it’s really about students. Because in student ministry all the evidence shows is that if they don’t come to Christ when they’re adolescents, then the chances of them actually becoming Christians diminishes so we have to focus on student ministry.” And somebody else says, “What we really need to do is Bible study. People just don’t know the Bible well enough, so we have to teach everyone in the church. They really need to know Bible study.” Or somebody else says, “What we really need to be doing is sharing the gospel outside of the church. There are people out there who need to know about the love of Jesus and we’re so focused on teaching one another that we don’t get out there and teach.” Then somebody else says, “What we really need to be about is social justice. We really need to be making a big difference in the world around us and solving the problems.”

And all of those voices are right. All of those voices matter. You have people in the church who are really focused on accountability and being held accountable for the way you live your life. They lift up that the Bible has all sorts of passages about the judgment of God. Then you have others who say, “We’re not to be Pharisees and rule-bound. We need to focus on mercy and grace.”

All of those voices matter. And we come together into a place where what we’re trying to do is create a symphony.

Now here’s the problem. When it comes to opinions, we live in a culture that’s become increasingly divided and we find ourselves gathering in these echo chambers. That’s the word they use nowadays. Echo chambers. That’s where people are with people who agree with them. So you hang out with people who agree with you. Those are your friends and you’re with them and you feel comfortable like you can talk freely with them in that place. And if you’re hanging around with people you know don’t agree with you just don’t talk about anything very substantive. You talk about the Astros. Everyone loves the Astros. You talk about how much you hate the Yankees. Everyone hates the Yankees! Everyone hates the Dodgers! You talk about those things, so you don’t have to talk about anything very deep because doing that seems so dividing. You get your news from a cable station that says what you want it to say, and you read posts from people who agree with you. You listen to podcasts from people you agree with. The only thing you hear about people who disagree with you is really negative.

Here's what even makes me sadder. It's that over the years and it's a fairly recent phenomenon that the church is becoming that way, too. That you have conservative churches and conservative people go to those churches, and you have progressive churches and progressive people go to those churches. And they hear a progressive preacher preach and they are surrounded by progressive people. A conservative hears a conservative preacher preach and they're surrounded by conservative people. So churches are just another form of the echo chamber.

Here's why I'm so proud and blessed and excited and fortunate to be a pastor of this church. That's not the kind of church we're in. It's not this church. This church is full of all sorts of people. Full of conservatives, progressives, Republicans and Democrats and Libertarians and Green Partiers. Is that what you call someone in the Green Party – a Green Partier? Sounds good.

We've got people across the board theologically; we've got people across the board in terms of social issues. We are diverse in opinion, united in mission. That's who we are. And sometimes it's hard but most of the time, I've got to be honest with you, it's refreshing. It's refreshing to be in a place that so counter-cultural in that way. That we choose to be with people that we don't necessarily agree with.

Now let me clear about one thing. I'm not saying that everyone is equally right. I'm not saying that there is no objective truth and that every opinion is just as good as any other opinion. I don't believe that to be the case at all. But what I do believe is that we are called on to be with everybody. Jesus was with everybody. He was with Pharisees, he was with Roman centurions, he was with lepers, and he was with outcasts. He was with prostitutes, he was with all sorts of folks. He chose to be incredibly inclusive in relationships.

We've got to be in a place that we can be together. It's better together. I've said it before and sometimes it's harder together, but it's better together.

Now what I want to do today is to quickly share with you four things from this particular Scripture. He says, "I can't say to the hand, I don't need you. I can't say to the ear I don't need you." So what do we do instead? I think this teaches us four things.

The first is that we can't say to one another, "I don't need to listen to you." We need to have conversations. I'm not talking about debates or discussions in large groups. I'm saying, sit down with one other person and have a conversation.

The Book of James says that we are to be quick to listen and slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Quick to listen.

Megan Phelps-Roper belonged to the Westboro Baptist Church. You might know them – it's the group that would protest by standing outside of military funerals and say that this person's death was the responsibility of the United States because it had become so decadent, and also because it had allowed homosexuality and a whole host of other things. So full of anger and hatred. She had grown up in that church. Her grandfather was the founder of the Westboro Baptist Church.

Anyway, she went to the Westboro Baptist Church and she and her sister in 2012 left the church. She claims that she left because – believe it or not – of Twitter. That's hard to believe. This is a rather long quote from her, but I want you to listen to it because I think it's important. She says, "A strange pattern developed. Someone would arrive at my profile with the usual rage and scorn. I would respond with a custom mix of Bible verses and pop culture references and smiley faces. They would understandably be confused and caught off guard. But then a conversation would ensue, and it was civil with genuine curiosity on both sides. Sometimes the conversation even bled over into real life. People I had sparred with on Twitter would come to a picket line and see me when I protested in their city. There was no confusion about our positions but the line between friend and foe was becoming blurred. We started to see each other as human beings and it changed the way we talked to one another. It took time but eventually these conversations planted seeds of doubt in me. My friends on Twitter took the time to understand Westboro's doctrines and why we believed what we believed.

Once I saw that we were not the ultimate arbiter of God's truth but flawed human beings, I could not justify our actions. One part I have returned to often is a surprising realization that I came to at that time. It was that it was a relief and privilege to let go of the harsh judgments that instinctively ran through my mind about nearly every person I saw. I realized that now I needed to learn, and I needed to listen. We have to talk and listen with those we disagree with. I will always be inspired to do so by the people I encountered on Twitter.

My friends on Twitter did not abandon their beliefs or principles, only their scorn. They approached me as a human being and that was more transformative than two full decades of outrage and disdain. They did not abandon their beliefs, only their scorn."

You have to listen to one another, talk to one another.

John Woolman was a Quaker who walked up and down the Eastern Seaboard in the 1700s. He stopped at all the homes of the Quakers and he would talk to them about slavery. Many of them were slaveholders, and he would just have a conversation. Over time they began to understand, and something changed. The Quakers abolished slavery 100 years before the United States did as a whole. Many say just because John Woolman decided to have conversations.

My friend Chap Temple and I have been in a conversation about same-sex marriage and homosexuality in the church. We have put that conversation on paper – sort of a White Paper – and it is posted on the church website. If you'd like to see it go to our website; I think it's the media tab. There's my blog there and you can open the paper and look at it. It's not light reading, about 30 pages long, so know that you're not going to just whip through it. What we're trying to do is to model how to have conversations about things that are divisive, that are substantive and respectful with one another. So go take a look at that if you feel like it.

That's the first thing – we have to learn to listen, and to have conversations.

Here's the second. The Scripture says, "... and 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..."

So choose respect for other people, especially those you don't agree with. Those that you find less honorable, treat with greater respect. Boy, that sounds counterintuitive, doesn't it?

Everybody has a teacher – probably most of you do – that made a particular influence on your life. Mine was a woman named Megan Marsak and it was in fourth grade. I was an obnoxious fourth grader and grew into an obnoxious adult. My friends and I would get together. There was a kid in our class who lied insistently. What I'm talking about is whoppers. He'd say, "My family and I climbed Mt. Everest while we were on spring break. We'd say, "Really? So you did?" So we just started to tease him incessantly and say things like, "Oh, did you learn to fly over Christmas break?" Things like that.

Finally our teacher called us aside. She said, "You know he's making up those lies just so he'll be accepted by you all. You really need just to bring him in and treat him nicely, and he'll quit doing that." Then she said, "Treating him with respect is not about him – it's about you."

Treating others with respect is about our character, not about their character. When there are people you disagree with, even as obnoxious as they are, if we treat them out of respect that's about us.

Here's the third thing. Paul goes on, "...that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." Have some empathy. Care about others and have empathy for them.

There's a book you might have read *All's Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque. In there there's a German soldier in a trench who comes across an enemy soldier who's dying. He has compassion for him and gives him a drink out of his canteen. They begin this conversation and the dying man shares with him about his wife and his children. He asks him to reach into his pocket, and when the other man does so, he brings out a photograph of the man's wife and children. They look at it together, and the soldier sees how much they're like his own wife and children. All of a sudden there is this bond between that transcends their differences. They realize that they're both human beings, they both have wives and children they love.

We've got to realize and have empathy for others about how they feel. What they've experienced. What are their journeys like? How did they get to believe what they believe? What matters to them? Have some empathy.

Here's the last thing. In the Hymn of Preparation we sang the lines, "Let me be your servant." In Galatians, Paul says "Bear one another's burdens, for in doing so you fulfill the law of Christ."

I received a book from Mary Jo Loyd, a member of our church who lives away now, and it's called *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge and Belonging*. It's by a woman who's a physician and her name is Rachel Naomi Remen. Her grandfather was also a physician and it's just full of wonderful vignettes about what it's like to be a human being and to be a doctor. But in it she says that there was a moment in her career when she realized that her job was really not to fix other people but to serve them, to bless them any way she could. Sometimes that meant trying to fix them. But sometimes that's not what they were looking for.

What if when we connected with people that we disagreed with and we decided our job wasn't to fix them? It wasn't to sort of make them right, but our job was to serve them, and to bless them in any way we could.

We all need each other. We all have different voices, different passions, and different opinions. We all have different spiritual gifts, different journeys. But for the symphony to be right we have to hear every instrument. Every voice matters.

Gracious God, we confess that sometimes we wish everyone was just like us. But the truth is that would not be a marvelous world, not the one you created. We ask that you would open us up to be in relationship with people with whom we disagree. To love them, to bless them, to serve them, to listen to them, to care about them. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.