

For the Health of the Holy Body
September 22, 2013
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So what happens when we look in the mirror?

A whole bunch of stuff, right?

Seems simple, but there are a lot of complicated thoughts

that fill our minds...

... Some of it conscious, a lot of it subconscious.

And we do it a lot, don't we? ...Look in the mirror.

Each time we use the restroom, (which happens more and more, each year, it seems.)

We catch glimpses of ourselves as we walk from place to place...

...Hanging mirrors in people's living rooms. Knickknacks in kitchens and hallways.

We see ourselves when we style our hair or brush our teeth,

getting ready to go out into the world, each day.

And those are the long looks, right?

The ones when we consciously notice the most about ourselves.

Consciously, we notice the different lines in our faces,

how much deeper they start looking over time.

We notice our hair. The way it falls over our scalps.

Wondering if it's in the best position it could be.

If it's as thick as we'd like it, and if there's something else we could be doing to boost the volume...

And if it's a full length mirror. Forget about it!

Not sure if it's the same for guys.

Probably not, since you guys have been blessed,

to not really care so much.

But for us ladies.

Oh man! The whole gamut.

Is this line straight enough? Is this line full enough?

Do these clothes make my hips look big? How well do they hang over my abdomen?

Are my upper arms encased enough to not look flabby?

Am I finally “old?” Are these clothes even in style anymore?

And on and on and on and on and on.

It goes this way all the time. In varying degrees. Man or woman....And it goes this way, because each of us,

Deep down---whether we want to admit it or not---want to present ourselves as perfectly as possible, each day.

Even if we’ve grown enough in mind to let this stuff go,

it still plays there, very quietly, if not silently in the back parts of our thoughts.

And I think this happens because these thoughts go beyond choice.

They fall into the category of instinct, right?

Regardless of the iphones in our hands, and fancy tablets we run our fingers along,

Inside each of us, we’re still very very basic.

I think in the backs of our minds, silent, instinct to SURVIVE asks us

if maybe we’ll be ousted from our clan in the forest for consuming too much food.

If we’ll be less appealing as people who can reproduce,

if we don’t make ourselves look just right.

If we’re getting too old to be useful

in helping our other clan members survive the hardships of nature...

All of this building up in our heads and driving us
to want to be just these perfect little bundles of a human.

But as natural and common to all of us this is,
we also know we're really just doing ourselves a disservice by thinking this way, right?
By *judging* ourselves so harshly. Because at the end and the start of the day, we're only
human.

And the same *nature* that drives us to want to be better,
also makes us, automatically by birth, *imperfect* beings.

We walk around each day in imperfect bodies,
just hoping and trying for the best as we move along.

So let's think together this morning for a little while,
about the different places these same feelings come into play.

Where *else* do we feel this pressing need?

Where else do we have this sense of urgency toward perfection,
and frustration when it inevitably is not there?

Our reading from Paul, this morning—1st Corinthians ch 12--brings us back to this image
of the body, doesn't it?

Now, I won't read the first twelve verses, since the liturgist just went over those words.

But in that passage,

He talks about our spiritual gifts, right? All of them different---unique.

And this imagery he uses, brings our minds to this understanding

of each of us being a part of this larger *body*, taking on different attributes. Different roles.

Each of us existing as different parts of the whole.

In the verses past the ones listed in our bulletin, verses 12-31, say:

12 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. 13 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. 14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 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. 16 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.

Where do we find ourselves, here in Paul's thoughts.

We're back in front of that mirror, aren't we?

Paul here, is talking about the ways we get down on our selves.

The ways we criticize ourselves. Judge ourselves.

Focusing on these feelings of self doubt, in our imperfection.

But it's not in that survival instinct we have as individuals,

Hoping to present nicely to the world...

... it's our hope to survive as the CHURCH. As the holy body of Christ, isn't it?

But he goes on to set us straight in the way we see ourselves.

In the way we perceive ourselves, as a unified presence in the world.

From verse 17, he says:

17 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? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as *he* chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the

body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 21 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."

To the church in Corinth, as it examines each part of itself,

He's saying 'STOP. Okay? Just stop and listen.

As individuals, alone, we are not perfect. We can't be all things.

Stop glaring at each of your parts like that, and take a look at yourself. All of you.

We're each just these tiny things---

---None of it full or complete on its own---but *together*, we join to make something larger.

Something in need of *each* of its *imperfect* parts,

in order to stand and work and live in the world. As a single body. As a whole.

From verse 22, when he talks about this worry

we lay on each of our individual parts

for not being exactly and fully perfect on their own, he says:

22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 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; 24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. 27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

As a church, as a body together, formed fully of individually imperfect parts.

Imperfect people.

(And that means all of us. Not just one or two, but all, including myself, the DS, the bishop... because none of us being Christ ourselves, have got it all figured out.)

...As this body together, we're entering into *stewardship* season.

And oof. That's a tough one.

It's that time of looking at ourselves, as God's church, in the mirror, isn't it?

A time of self examination.

As the body of the church, at this time of the year, we look at ourselves,

and we're consumed by all of these thoughts about

what we can do to make things better in the way we present ourselves to the world.

In the ways we're growing. Or even *shrinking* with age, right?

We wonder about the ways we've made ourselves *appealing* to the world around us...

...To attract more people and make them want to draw near to us,

In order to be more intimately in touch with each part.

We wonder if we're still in style.

We look at ourselves and worry about how we've set ourselves up

to both receive and give the love of God to each other

as we interact with the world outside our sanctuary door.

And what Paul says to the Corinthians, and I believe the truth

of what he wrote in that passage still applies to all of us, together, this day,

Is to not get caught up in all of that negativity washing around in our minds

about which parts on their own aren't perfect.

But to look at it all together, and know that we as a whole body,

Are God's creation. God's choice.

That God set this body up as it is, and that God has given each of us gifts

to help the whole better thrive---better *act*, better *be*, in the world.

Paul tells us to take our eyes away from whatever criticism we might feel

for any tiny piece not being exactly what we want it to be on its own,

And instead, working *together*, the very best we can, as God's given each of us gift and ability,

To be the holy instrument of love-giving God made the church to be,

for all of God's people.

Now, did the Corinthians listen to Paul? Will we?

We can't know for sure if the Corinthians were able

to put any of this into practice, because these letters from Paul are one-sided.

We've never seen the other side of the conversation

(which leaves a lot to possibility and imagination).

And we can't know yet if we've heard the words of Paul, the future still unknown.

But I think there's a lot of hope for us here, together, to live into his advice.

And I think others did a lot to bring those thoughts to life, too.

Let's just take the briefest look at what the early church was like in Paul's day.

In those first days the disciples worked together to make real,

what Jesus had envisioned, himself.

It wasn't all glitz, I'll tell ya that. But man, it was something to behold.

Not because it was like the perfectly magnificent structures like we see today,
in cathedrals towering over big-budget foundations.

In the Vatican with its golden pillars and Italian marble floors.

None of these things made the church what it was in the world.

The early church---it was very basic... and beautiful in its simplicity.

And that to me, of course, rings so much truer to the teachings of Christ
than any of these multi-million dollar charades.

These churches. Most of them were tiny. Just like us.

They were HOUSE CHURCHES.

Small groups of individuals drawn spiritually to the life and teachings of Jesus,

Who came together in little rooms----people's homes---

---to do big things for each other and God in the world.

I look around at Deer Park, here, and feel a trace of that in where we are, ourselves.

This sanctuary used to be a basement.

This church, was someone's house. A family's home.

And all of us just a small group of spiritually driven people,

who come together in our love for God and each other,

With a hope to help change the world for the better.

The church wasn't about perfection or glitz in those early days.

It was about the people. Each of them coming together in their imperfect ways,

To contribute whatever they had to give—physically and mentally and spiritually---

---for the greater good of God's hope for the world.

And it's described in the book.

From Acts, chapter 2, verses 42-47:

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

And this way of the early church is just what Paul hoped the Corinthians would see, and remember, and bring into their own experience as God's church, when he said those things.

This mutual sharing of ourselves, each of us,
in *any* way God has made us capable in our gifts and talents,
for the greater good of the body as a whole.

Through this stewardship season--as painful as we sometimes make it for our body--
as we look in the mirror, at what we are, as God's church,

And specifically as Deer Park United Methodist Church,

Let's remember those words of Paul. Let them ring always, in our own ears.

Let's look at ourselves and appreciate the gifts we each bring to the whole.

Let's do what we can to help each part thrive in what it gives to the rest.

Whether it's through teaching the word, or talking in bible study,

or leading small groups, or reading for our services, or providing financial support,

or physical support in participating in the activities that happen here,

Or *whatever* it is God has given you the ability to give back to God's holy body,

For the health and thriving of the whole.

And let's do our best to take our mind away
from any kind of worry or dwelling, or negative focus on any part by itself.
Because that's just corrosive. It's self-defeating.
It's entirely counterproductive to our experience of ourselves in the world.
And will only make us inhibited in the way we experience the world,
and the way others experience us.

And let's keep in mind too, that same truth that exists
as we stare each day in the mirror at our physical bodies,
when thinking about the church.

Let's remember, that as much criticism as we lay upon ourselves
for not being absolutely perfect,

We often look a lot better to the people around us than we give ourselves credit for.

Women—it's something we need to remind ourselves of often---

---But all of us together, as the church,

Let's remember that we're a lot more beautiful than we allow ourselves to realize.

These tiny flaws our eyes so often focus on, not even registering in the eyes of others,

After we walk out that door and join in the life of the world.

*As individuals. As the church---*you and me coming together to form a whole—

Remember that *God* made us what we are. Each part, according to God's hope and God's will.

And let's keep in our hearts the words of the Psalmist,

who reminds us that wherever we are, whatever we're doing, whatever we look like,

We live always in the shelter of the Most High.

---Our refuge, and our fortress, in whom we can *trust*.

It was God who made us who we are, and it's God alone,

who will make us, together, into what we will be.

Through the strength, and power, and love, of God's guidance,

God will lead us---imperfect parts in all---still into a more excellent way.

Amen.