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“Body Memory”

I Corinthians 12:12-13

George C. Anderson

My sermon title is a play on a phrase that is often used in sports, “Muscle Memory.” The transcendent games of basketball players Stephen Curry and Caitlin Clark, Golfers Jon Rahm and Nelly Korda, and skiers Mikaela Shiffrin and Ingemar Stenmark are built on having mastered drills that they can perform maneuvers of their sports without thinking about it. They no longer act but react when they

- swing a bat, racket or club;
- dribble, pass and shoot a basketball;
- or step touch and pivot turn in dancing.

When between dismount and entry, the Olympic diver executes tucks, picks, twists and flips, her mind is not so much on deciding as her body is remembering.

I am not original with this illustration of muscle memory. Many intellectuals are also sports fans, and more than a few philosophers and theologians have said that we need to pay attention to what these elite athletes can teach us about living the good life. How they master physical disciplines and drills could teach us about moral and ethical disciplines and drills as well.

One of the latest is James K. A. Smith who talks about the power of habit in his book *You Are What You Love*. He says that there is a symbiotic relationship between the habits we form and what we love. We

- establish habits because of what we love
- and what we love grows from what we habitually do.



When what one loves is unhealthy or harmful to others, the best spiritual therapy is not so much making different decisions as it is recalibrating habits so better decisions can more easily be made. It is hard and frustrating at first, but as disciplines are kept—

- whether to exercise to train the body
- or worship, pray, and service of others to train the soul—
 - one can learn to love the object of one’s devotions.

Smith says, “The orientation of the heart happens from the bottom up, through the formation of habits of desire. Learning how to love takes practice.” The Apostle Paul says it this way in Romans when his instruction is to “clothe yourselves in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience,” in order to “put on love.”¹

When it comes to one’s character—one’s morals and one’s soul—I don’t call it training “Muscle Memory.” I call it “Body Memory.”

Which leads me back to the Apostle Paul who speaks of the body in I Corinthians 12. Only the body he speaks of is not that of an individual body but of a community. Specifically, he speaks of a community gathered to worship and follow Jesus.

My sermon is based on chapters 12 and 13 of I Corinthians, but I’ll read only two verses.

I Corinthians 12:12-13

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.

Paul spends the bulk of chapter 12 playing with the metaphor of the church being a body. The “church” is a body where Christ is its head.

Imagine Paul as being a teacher at a children’s Bible School. He would have just finished leading the children in singing”

Head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes.

Head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes.

And Eyes and ears and mouth and nose.

Head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes.

Paul then calls for volunteers. Hands shoot up and Paul chooses eight of them. Around each of their necks he hangs a picture of a body part: a foot, a hand, an ear, an eye, and so on. He then goes from child to child and asks the rest of the children why the body needs this part.

The body needs

- the eye to see,

¹ Romans 13:14.



- the foot to walk,
- the mouth to speak and so on.

“Yes,” Paul says, “It is wonderful that this body has each part, because all of them are important and useful. And isn’t it wonderful children that the church has each of you children in it. You are all equally important so we can together do what Jesus wants us to do.”

That *Children’s Sermon* I just gave you is basically what Paul says in chapter 12. It is that simple. I used this setting of a Children’s Bible School because there is a sense in which Paul talks to the Corinthians as if they are children...

- not children in the sense of their innocence and naivete,
 - their trust and playfulness,
- but in the sense of their being childish.

Cliques have formed within the Corinthian church based on wealth and privilege. The “elite” tend to have exclusive gatherings. They tend to

- look down on others,
- insist on their own way,
- overvalue what they have to offer
 - and undervalue what others have to offer.

Paul wants to re-train the Corinthian Church body and create new Body Memory. He wants them to take on habits of hospitality, generosity, and worship centered in how they observe the Lord’s Supper so that they will

- love Christ more
- and their privileges less.

He wants to get them to the point where loving actions are more habit than conscious decision. He describes what that looks like in the next chapter, used so often in weddings but also in memorial services when a shining servant of Christ is remembered. I read this passage at the graveside service for Helen Fitzpatrick.

What does it look like when a Christian community is instinctively of Christ?

- “It is patient, it is kind.
- It is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
- It does not insist on its own way;
- it is not irritable,
- it keeps no record of wrongs,
- it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth.
- It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”



This passage can be helpful to individuals and that's why it is appropriately read

- at weddings
 - as a sort of advance marriage counseling reminding the two being wed to treat each other tenderly even when they disagree,
- and at memorial services
 - in giving thanks for a life that bore the light of love.

But let's remember that Paul wrote this for a church. To rightly hear the impact of what Paul is saying, we need to get out of our heads what we often think of when we hear the word, "church." Often what we first think of is a name, a place or an address. We might think of buildings;

- perhaps a stone cathedral-like structure,
- or a white clapboard church in the countryside,
- or a large, red brick church downtown...
 - or maybe those churches built in the 70's that look like motels with steeples,
 - or massive arenas built for light shows and bands.

Or maybe a name comes to mind, a name you would find on a sign in front of the church or affixed to its outer wall:

- Presbyterian,
- Greek Orthodox,
- Pentecostal,
- Roman Catholic,
- Baptist...
 - or a church, "Of Christ," or "Of God."

Paul would think it exceedingly strange that those images come to mind since in his day communities of faith met in homes, caves, and synagogues. His idea of church is as a *community* gathered to worship God and follow Jesus,

- a community that is either getting along or not getting along,
- who are doing what Christ would have them do or forgetting to do what Christ would have them do.

I have to take a bit of a detour here. There are some who think we should go back to being just like the early church; that buildings, traditions, rules and offices get in the way of loving God and following Jesus.

But that is to confuse form with function. Times change and functions have to change to meet the times. Let's not forget that when Paul was writing to the early church in Corinth, he was



writing to a dysfunctional community who needed to be told how to behave. Why would any healthy community today want to adopt the dissention, class snobbery, and bickering of that community?

But though function has to adapt to changing times in ways that Paul could not have imagined, he had it right about what should not change. Any community gathered to worship God and follow Jesus—

- whether it be a cathedral in Spain where mass is held on a daily basis,
- a Quaker meeting house in London
 - where most of worship is conducted in silence,
- a red brick church in the town square
- a converted store in a strip mall
 - where people worship with a bagel in one hand and a coffee in another,
- or a small group meeting in someone's home for Bible study and prayer,
 - or in a basement where people admit to their addictions—

it needs develop the habits and disciplines that built the Body Memory of love.... which ends up looking like compassion, justice, and mutual forbearing (a fancy way of saying finding a way to get along despite differences).

So, yes functions have to change to maintain the essentials.

Think about worship. Though worship has been a practice of the church from its beginning days till now, it certainly has changed. Communion isn't a potluck supper as it was in the Corinthian Church, and most Christian preachers don't sound like teaching rabbis. But the ends of worship which build Body Memory remain. Worship remains a time

- to get heads and hearts straight,
- to confess what we did that we shouldn't a
 - and what we did not so that we shoulda,
- to pray, to sing, to consider what it is that God may want us to hear.

We worship to build Body Memory to instinctively love God and serve the world.

Serving the world looks different today than it did in Paul's day. Then it was about giving alms, taking a collection from some members when other members are in trouble, giving a cloak away if one has two, providing a sojourner a meal and room to sleep in one's home. Today, with the church's expanded size and resources, it might look like

- an afterschool program for children,
- a church or a hospital being built,
- supporting a clinic providing mental health care to the underserved,
- committing to efforts to overcoming class and race inequities,



- sending thousands of dollars and teams of volunteers to disaster sites,
- providing a temporary home for those with housing instability,
- and supporting a seminary and maybe hosting symposiums to train future church leaders.

Paul would be amazed.

This past Lent, we three ministers created videos that looked back at the history of Second Presbyterian Church, and I did one on the history of missions at this church. For me, it was an education in Body Memory.

- We take it for granted that benevolences are to be included in our church budget.
 - But guess what? It wasn't until this church had its third minister before benevolences appeared in the budget.
- We take for granted the work done at the Presbyterian Community Center as we have a need to continually support their work.
 - But guess what. There was a time when members of this church had to join with others in Montgomery Presbytery to figure out what it was this center was going to be and what it was going to do.
- We take for granted working at the Highland Park School and helping those with housing instability.
 - But you've guessed it. There was a time when we had to see the priorities, make the decisions to do something, and then figure out how to do it.

That is Body Memory, where we made a habit of ways of helping and now we don't have to reinvent those wheels but just remember to keep turning them toward the end of love.

Or think about our youth program, which was the subject of one of Ben's videos.

- At one point, we had to figure out what our youth program was going to look like.
- At one point, we had to figure out how to send our youth to their first conference and on their first mission trip.
- At one point, leaders of our youth program thought it through and decided that a youth program needed to be more than recreation but study, worship prayer and service work.
- Somewhere along the line, we became clear that we needed to treat our youth more as emerging adults than as children and give them leadership opportunities including preaching on a certain Sunday.

We take a lot of what we do now for granted. We instinctively do a lot of these things because when it comes to our youth we have Body Memory. We just have to remember it is to the end of nurturing love of God, each other, and the world.

Paul would be amazed by it all. He would not have seen it coming. But he still would insist that we do what we do in order to know and share the love of God in following Jesus.



Since this is Legacy Sunday, I'll say this one thing about the funds we have. In their own way they represent Body Memory... as long as we remember why they were established and make sure they don't sit there but actually do the work of love envisioned by those who established them... even if how they are used looks different than before.

Yes, our congregation is blessed with body memory which makes it possible not to instinctively carry on functions that both reinforce and express the love of God. My charge is that we do not neglect the drills, that we keep practicing what we think Christ's love looks like in this day and age, and not lose our way in being a body with Christ as the head making a witness to God's love in the world.

