



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“The Body of Christ”
1 Corinthians 12:12-27
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Have you ever wondered what body part you are? If the church is a body and all of us parts of that body, what part are you? Personally, I would rather be the heart than a strand of hair. I would rather be the brain or the eyes or the mouth than any of the body parts that have to do with the expulsion of waste products. And who wants to be known as the appendix of church life? Maybe someday we will figure out why you are here but, truthfully, we have no idea what your purpose is and it appears as though we can survive just fine without you....

But, I am taking this too far. This image is not meant to be taken literally. It's a metaphor—given to us by Paul to help us better understand the ways in which we belong to one another in the life of the church. We are the body of Christ. We all have our role to play. There is diversity within unity. We are all one. I need to tell you up front that I've always found this metaphor appealing but a little naïve, a little soft.

At least that's what I thought until I heard about alien hand syndrome. I learned of it through the story of Karen Byrne.¹ In her late 20s, Karen had a very serious operation on her brain. The operation was to treat her epilepsy which was so severe that she was having near constant seizures. Karen says when she woke up after the surgery, her speech was a little funny, but overall she felt great. She was sitting on the hospital bed talking to her surgeon when, all of a sudden, her left hand picked itself up and started moving towards her shirt, and then proceeded to carefully undo the top button. Her hand was taking her shirt off. Karen was shocked and so was her surgeon. Her surgeon said, “Karen, do you realize what's happening?” She said, “Yeah, something's wrong.”

Suddenly, the hand seemed to get angry. It was tearing the buttons off the shirt. Karen kept telling it to stop. “Knock it off,” she said to her hand. Eventually, she and the surgeon wrestled her hand down, but it was troubling that the hand acted like it had intent. The hand seemed to have a different mind.

When Karen went home from the hospital, the hand—this new hand with a mind of its own—went with her. Most of the time, the hand was OK, but, at times, it would get upset with her. When Karen did something the hand really didn't like, it would smack her right across her face. Karen was eventually diagnosed with a medical condition known as alien hand syndrome.

Maybe you have had an experience when a part of your body is not cooperating with the rest of you. Twice in my life, I have tried rock climbing. Both times, about halfway up the pitch, my legs decided on their own to stop working. I would move one leg off the face of the rock and it would start shaking violently all on its own. It was not a good thing.

It's never a good thing when part of your body goes rogue. It is disconcerting at best, devastating at worst. The illnesses I most fear—Alzheimer's and stroke—involve parts of my body no longer playing well with the rest of me.

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2017/07/29/540214710/when-your-hand-has-a-mind-of-its-own>

Alien hand syndrome is an extreme example. It's a documented medical occurrence. Imagine, as another patient has reported, sitting down to play the piano, only to have one hand levitate far above the piano keys as you try to practice. It's not that you've changed your mind about practicing. But that hand is obeying new directions.

Alien hand syndrome is linked to a breakdown in communication between the right and left sides of the brain. In the surgery to treat Karen's epilepsy, the set of fibers that connect the two sides of the brains was severed. Alien hand syndrome points out something important about our brains: the symphony of our minds depends on the interconnectedness of different regions of the brain, each playing its own role.²

Sounds like Paul, doesn't it? I've never really thought about what it means for part of the body to not be in sync with the rest of it. After reflecting on alien hand syndrome, this image of Paul's feels less soft and more powerful. I'm starting to think this metaphor has legs. And hands. And eyes.

A church or any organization works best when all the parts are working together and moving towards a shared goal or purpose. We are Christ's body on earth—and we have the honor, the privilege, the joy of being Christ's hands and feet and heart in the world. We can do powerful things when we work together. Rowing in the same direction. Everyone on the same page, on the same bus, using the same playbook. Firing on all cylinders, a smooth running machine. All of us valued for our unique contribution, all of us at our best.

Except, that's not a description of any church I have ever been a part of. And, if such a church exists, I don't think I would want anything to do with it. Yes, I want church to be the place that draws out the best in me and I want it to be the place that welcomes me when I am at my worst—lost, broken, angry, reckless, empty, disconnected.

I've been thinking. If the church is the body of Christ, as Paul says, what happens to his body? Literally, what happens to Jesus' physical body? We know the story. His body is beaten. Battered. Broken.

That means we who are the body of Christ are also broken. Never whole. Never all pulling in the same direction. Hopelessly imperfect.

Do you want to be a part of something perfect? I'm serious. In my opinion, perfect is boring and pointless really and, if the church were a perfect place full of perfect people, there would be no room in it for you and me.

The body that is the church—at its best—is a place where we are accepted as we are. Where we are loved the way God loves us. We are welcomed despite or because of our peculiarities, our insecurities, our strange habits, our off-putting fears, etc., etc.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a Lutheran pastor serving a congregation in Denver. She's not your typical minister. She's a former stand-up comic, recovering alcoholic, over six feet tall, and covered in tattoos. She remembers the first time she felt loved and accepted for who she is. This happened at a Unitarian summer camp she worked at in her early twenties.

She remembers

...it was just such a profoundly accepting place. And it was the first time that it felt like being me was a good thing instead of a problem. And I showed up there on staff, and I was like, celebrated. People were like, "You're awesome," and I was like, "I don't get that reaction much." You know? And being in a

² <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/02/09/583633358/invisibilia-the-otherworldly-alien-hand-syndrome-animated>

space where I felt accepted and even celebrated, man, it allowed me to relax into myself in a way that felt holy.³

Church should be such a place. Church should be a place where folks feel such acceptance. And, if everyone is accepted for who they are, if each person brings the full force of their unique story and personality to the life of the church, it follows that the church can never be a smooth running machine. We aren't all on the same page, we can struggle to make decisions, sometimes we head off in different directions. We disappoint one another. In fact, Bolz-Weber describes church as the place where we take turns being the ones who disappoint one another.

I love that.

She explains,

We take turns being the ones who are disappointing. And then, forgive each other and move on. And you know, maybe it's that guy's turn to be disappointing, but next week it'll be me. So it's that culture of turn-taking when it comes to being the ones who need grace, or who are giving grace, or who remind each other that grace is a thing.⁴

I love that image of the church—it is both realistic and hopeful. A reminder of how this body operates. We take turns being the ones in need of grace and forgiveness and tenderness. We take turns being the ones offering such things. Either way, we need one another, the way the different parts of the body need one another to survive. Even Karen's hand, with a mind of its own, cannot exist in isolation. It depends on the rest of the body for its blood supply, its energy, its life.

That is true of the church as well. We belong to one another in the same way that we belong to God. Connected to God and to each other in this broken, imperfect body that is the church.

On any given Sunday, the gathering that is the body of Christ suffers from alien hand syndrome. Alien heart syndrome. Alien mouth syndrome. Because, on any given Sunday, there is a lot going on in the room—because there is a lot going on in our lives and in the world—we aren't all in sync, we aren't all on the same page and that's OK—more than OK—that is the way it is supposed to be. This body is built for that kind of honesty and built for that kind of rich diversity.

We are the body of Christ.

I wonder if we should welcome new people into the church by saying something like:

Welcome to the body of Christ. We are so glad that you are a part of this enterprise because you are awesome. We need to be honest with you. This body is a bit broken. We will disappoint you. You will disappoint us. We try not to disappoint each other all at the same time. That works pretty well. Welcome to the body of Christ.

And, I would add, at our best, at our best, we aren't just Christ's body broken, we are also his body risen.

The church—it is messy, broken, disappointing—and yet God lives in it and in us and together we are so much more than we are apart and together we actually can do amazing things—we discover who we truly are, we care

³ <https://katebowler.com/episode-1-insight-outsiders-nadia-boltz-weber-full-transcript/>

⁴ <https://katebowler.com/episode-1-insight-outsiders-nadia-boltz-weber-full-transcript/>

for one another with great tenderness, we make the world a better place. We have the privilege of being Christ's hands and feet and heart, serving a broken world.

We are the body of Christ.