

Reconciling in Christ Sunday  
January 21, 2007

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10  
I Corinthians 12:12-31  
Luke 4:14-21

St. Paul's, Red Wing, MN

I've never liked my cheeks. They are just too.....big. I get them from my grandmother. There is a picture somewhere of her in her 20's. When I was in my 20's and looked at that picture, I was looking at myself. As much as I loved my grandmother, I have not been grateful for this legacy.

I do not like my hands either. I got them from my other grandmother. They have short and fat fingers, good for milking cows. My sister got the long, slender fingers.

I am suspicious that many of us have the same complaint. We do not like a particular part of our anatomy. The shape of our heads. A nose. An eyebrow. In fact I KNOW a lot of us do not like some part of our anatomy, because plastic surgery is a booming business. In our generation, in this time and place, in this country, millions of dollars (is it even billions?) are being spent to change how we look. And it's not just women, though more women do it than men. But it is guys, too.

And as we get older, we like our bodies less and less. We nip and tuck. We dye and liposuct. Here's the dirty little secret about all those alterations to put off aging. It does not work. Over time, you have to do it again and again. AND it does not stop you from getting older.

All of this can seem almost funny, except it is so tragic. What a scandal and misdirection of resources. Think what we could do if we just accepted who we are and spent our energy and money on something else.

And then, there is the body of Christ. We sometimes play plastic surgeon with the church. It is not a new phenomenon. From the time of letters written by the Apostle Paul, through the middle ages, the Inquisition, until now, God's people have thought that we should do a little nip and tuck. There are some parts of the body we can live without, or there are others that need to shape up in order to be a part of the body of Christ. They don't look good. They represent sin.

It started with lepers and those who were seriously ill, either physically or mentally. People who were blind or deaf were obviously beyond God's mercy and love, so they were left out. Prisoners. Well, that's easy. They are sinners, so they have got to be left out. We got over most of that, though we still have a hard time dealing with mental illness and people who land in jail.

From the beginning, it has been difficult for the community of faith, the body of Christ, to accept those who are different. It has been hard for those with particular gifts, to accept and HONOR others with different gifts. When Paul wrote I Corinthians, the community was divided by all sorts of disputes. Some spoke in tongues and others did not. Some could prophecy and preach, while others did not. Some did less flashy work of teaching and organizing. Some were careful about keeping dietary laws according to the covenant with Moses, and others said that did not matter any more.

It would appear the body of Christ, from the beginning has been very good at pointing fingers at each other. "I've got more gifts than you do," or "I've got SPIRITUAL gifts and you do not." Worse, some said, "Well, I guess I just do not belong. There is no place for me in the community."

The details and the disputes change over time. The big issue changes over the generations, sometimes. The message remains the same. The Good News of Jesus Christ has not changed. It is a radical message of love. It is a radical message of acceptance. St. Paul uses this image of the

body in several letters to different churches all with members who are having a hard time accepting each other.

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. 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. 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."

Better yet, we turn to the very words of Jesus. "The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. I have been sent to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed."

When those gathered around Jesus heard those words, they rejoiced. God's people, in the synagogue gathered for worship and the Word were thrilled, until with further discussion, they discovered Jesus meant more than them. He meant more than those on the inside. He meant all God's children. He meant those on the outside, the foreigner, those who everyone else was sure did not belong. We get that text next week. Before Jesus is done speaking, they want to drive him out of town and throw him off a cliff.

The radical message of God's love means nobody is left behind. No child of God is left behind. Until we really understand that, we do not understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

That is what we celebrate today. As a Reconciling in Christ congregation, we celebrate it, and we confront the challenge that Gospel represents. For it calls me to love as Christ loved, and I don't want to. This Gospel calls me to love and respect every part of the body of Christ, and I don't want to.

I don't like my cheeks, but they are mine and I've got to learn to accept and honor them. Indeed, I have need of them, and I waste a lot of time and energy trying to change them or get rid of them.

The church has wasted a lot of time and energy over the years trying to protect itself from what it has perceived as sinners and those who don't belong. When, however, the church has spent its resources, its gifts and its heart in loving those that everyone else said should not be loved, we have managed to be the hands and feet of Christ. When the church cared for the sick, and hospitals were created, and people were healed. It was the church that established hospitals for the mentally ill and began the road to accepting people as sick and not possessed of demons. It was the community of faith, God's people, responding to the call to feed the poor that has relieved great suffering over the centuries.

It is the church even in our day, it has been the church who responds quickly and continually to those in need, from the Tsunami two years ago in the far east to Hurricane Katrina, to hunger in our world. When we spend our energy and resources on prison ministry, on care for struggling families, we are the hands and feet of Christ.

Jesus never turned anyone away. Not prostitutes. Not tax collectors. Not anybody. He sat down and ate and welcomed those who in his day were considered the worst of sinners. Jesus didn't care.

And if Jesus welcomed sinners to the table, it means he welcomes me to this table of grace. It means he welcomes you. It means everyone is welcome. We waste our time, we waste God's grace and love if we try to say anyone does not belong here. We are all captive and need to be set free by the radical grace of God. No exceptions. No conditions. Just as we are.

Come to the table. And welcome your neighbor as well.