

## Together in the Body

It just so happens I have spent some time recently in the company of two and three year olds – charming and adorable children, really, in the case of the two I am thinking of – they happen to be my grandchildren. However, looming large in their vocabularies are two phrases – “No” and “I do it myself.” I’ll do it myself. We start believing that at a young age in our culture – that we are independent and we can manage without anyone else. You see it everywhere, from the strong-willed two year old to our international trade policies – the idea that we can make it on our own, without help from anyone else. We are shaped by the idea that we’re supposed to lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

Think about that phrase for a minute – pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. Do you know what it means? Inside the tops of boots like cowboy boots are little straps or loops of leather that you grab or put hooks through to help pull your boots on. Those are your bootstraps. So imagine that you grab a hold of those bootstraps and pull as hard as you can. Can you lift yourself up off the ground so your feet aren’t touching that way? No, you can’t. It’s impossible. Originally “pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps” was an illustration of something that couldn’t be done. It was intended to say that you need help to pull yourself up off the ground. But somehow or other, over time, it’s gotten twisted around. The impossible act has become what we expect even the weakest people in our society to do.

In spite of expectations, though, it remains impossible for us to be totally independent. We are created to be interdependent – to rely on each other. We are a highly specialized people. Even if you look at something as comparatively simple as preparing a meal, in most cases there are farmers who grow the food, truckers who transport it to market, stores where it is packaged and sold, and those who cook the food, whether we are the cooks or its cooked in a restaurant. We depend on each other even to get food on the table.

Our interdependence is deeper than the simple mechanics of human life. The whole universe is interdependent, with each part in relationship with the other and each action having an effect on the whole. God is the one who created that interdependence, and God is part of it as well. We experience the presence of God through the loving touch or caring acceptance of the other. As we gather around the table we know we are joined not only to each other, but to God.

Because of our cultural background, though, most of us would find a down-side to that interdependence. That downside would be the “dependence” part. We tend to see dependence as something to be avoided. To be dependent is weak. For the youngest children and the oldest adults it is somewhat acceptable, but for anyone between eight and eighty, dependence is seen as suspect and we struggle against it. In my conversations with aging adults, one of the greatest fears is becoming dependent on others. The reality is that we already depend on one another all the time.

People with disabilities- and all of us are disabled at one point or another in our lives - are among those who are most aware of that dependence. Life with a disability, whether mental or physical is often precarious. A small change can make a vast difference in your ability to manage. Whether your disability is temporary like a broken arm or more permanent like blindness, you quickly learn how dependent you are. You depend on physical aids and assistance like wheel chairs and elevators and seeing eye dogs. For people with disabilities, though, the ability to depend on another person is the greatest factor in determining their quality of life or well-being.

This summer because of our call to be in ministry with people with disabilities, we'll be learning about how disability is addressed in the Bible and how we, with our words and acts, can be fully inclusive and welcoming to those with disabilities. And this is our starting place – the interdependence we experience, no matter who we are, in the body of Christ.

In I Corinthians 12, we see the quality of this interdependence. The metaphor of the community as a body was fairly common in Greek and Roman philosophy. When it was used in those contexts, though, it was often used to point out the importance of the hierarchy, the obedience to the head. Paul turns that upside down. "God has so arranged the body to give greater honor to the lesser member, so that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may all have the same care for one another. When one suffers, all suffer together with it. If one rejoices, all rejoice with it."

We are to lift one another up and care for one another, no matter how important we are or how insignificant the other seems. All are essential to the well-being of the body. We all have a part to play.

Think of your own body for a moment. There are the body parts we all know because we see them and use them all the time – our hands, our feet, our eyes, our hearts, our brains. If asked, you would say those are the important parts. But have you ever talked to someone who has lost their little toe? Seemingly insignificant as it is, the whole body is thrown out of balance when it's gone. Or the thyroid, a little gland you never even see? Yet when it doesn't work properly, the metabolism of the whole body is thrown out of whack.

Not only do we care for one another because that's what Christ's love calls us to do. We care for one another because in the body of Christ each person, whether young or old, abled or disabled, in the spotlight or in the background, has a gift to bring and a role to play. When we ignore the gifts of others, the whole body is weaker.

So today, we celebrate the body of Christ, with all its parts. We've recognized teachers and kids already. In a few minutes we'll be lifting a few more up for special notice. But know that each one of you, no matter who you are, is an important part of this body. We would be weaker without you. We are better with you. We feel your pain. We share your joy. For you all are the body of Christ, and individually members of it. Thanks be to God!

