



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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11th Sunday after Pentecost

A sermon by Brent J. Eelman

Who Takes Out the Trash?

Ephesians 4: 1-16

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

⁷ But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸ Therefore it is said,

"When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive;
he gave gifts to his people."

⁹ (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) ¹¹ The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴ We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

One of the distinct memories from my adolescent years was the New York City garbage strike of 1968. I was a high school student in New Jersey and the garbage strike was the big news. Every day, in the newspaper and on the television news, we saw images of the garbage piling up on the streets of the city. New Yorkers are known for their toughness and adaptability. Consequently, people came up with all types of clever ways to get rid of their trash so that it would not pile up in front of their residences. There is the urban legend about a woman who meticulously gift wrapped her trash and placed the attractive present by her door. Within hours the beautifully wrapped "present" was stolen, a fitting reward for a thief.

But after a week, the strike was no longer amusing. People became concerned about the rodent problem and the resulting spread of disease and infection that might result from all the garbage being piled high on the street. Whether or not you think labor strikes are a way to deal with wage negotiations, you have to believe that the New York sanitation workers made their point. The person who removes the trash is crucial to the smooth operation of any enterprise. There are no insignificant jobs! There are no insignificant jobs in the church either!

The Apostle Paul, in the letter to the Ephesians, used the image of the body to describe the church. This was common image for him. He employed it when he wrote to the dysfunctional Corinthian congregation, reminding them that they were "the Body of Christ" and needed to act like it. The body is an organic image that reminds us that we are not only related to one another, we are dependent upon each other. The hand is dependent upon the arm. The foot is dependent upon the leg. When one part is injured, when one part is hurting it affects the rest of the body. Think about it, a tooth is a very small part of our bodies, probable less than 1 tenth of a percent of us. But if it is decayed an infected, it can cause pain that debilitates the rest of our body.

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul wrote, "The whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

"Each part working...." Think about PPC. There are a lot of parts. Are all the parts working properly? Each of us is one of thos parts. Each of us is important to the whole body from the smallest child to the wisest elder. Each of us is part of the body of Christ at PPC.

What strikes me about this metaphor is that it is all inclusive. Paul was writing about the "whole body" from teeth to toes. He also emphasized the importance of each part. All the parts are necessary and needed to function properly. When one part is not working properly, the rest of the body compensates... and often suffers.

When we forget this within the life of the Christian community; when we forget this in our families and in our personal lives; we begin to take people for granted... I know that I am guilty of that. The title of this sermon asks a seemingly silly question: "Who takes out the trash?" But it illustrates that every function in the life of an organization is important. You, each and all are part of the body of Christ. You are valuable and important. You need to function properly.

There are 3 simple points that we can draw from this part of the text.

First: there is equality in the body of Christ. Too often we develop these hierarchies with levels and gradations. We do it in the church, and we do it at home, and we do it in the work world. There is some usefulness to these hierarchies, but more often than not they become means for putting people down and minimizing them. We need to remember that within the body of Christ, the only hierarchical position is the head... and that is Christ.

Small parts and little tasks are important. I learned this the hard way. A number of years ago, I was driving through Vermont, and my car began to sputter and finally stopped. After a few minutes it started again, and went a few miles and sputtered and stopped. This continued until I got it to a dealership where it could be repaired. I thought that I would be looking at a major engine overhaul... but when it was examined, the motor, the transmission and all the moving parts were fine.... The problem was the fuel filter. It was clogged and fuel could not get through... It was a two dollar part... seemingly unimportant that stopped the entire vehicle. Nothing could work without it.

In the kingdom of Christ... every part, every person's function is vital to the whole. You may think your contribution is small and insignificant. You may think that your place in the body of Christ is not important... that you don't matter... but you do! Your gifts and calling is vital the functioning of this Body of Christ called Poland Presbyterian Church.

Last Sunday we celebrated the Lord's Supper at both services. At 8:30 something happened that reminded me of how crucial the small tasks are to the smooth functioning of the whole congregation. When the offering is brought forward at that service, the elements for communion are also brought forward. For some reason it almost didn't happen. (It's ok.) I was up in the front, behind the table, thinking, wondering, sweating, and soon praying that someone would bring the elements forward. It is such a small thing... yet it is as important as the one who stands behind the table and invokes the presence of Christ.

Think about all the little things that need to happen in this body of Christ called Poland Presbyterian Church. There are bulletins to print, proof and fold. They need to be handed out. There is heat and A.C. to adjust. Someone needs to write the checks. Someone needs to usher. Someone needs to handle the slides and the sound. The grass outside doesn't mow itself. And certainly the trash does not disappear. "Who takes out the trash?" So many tasks, for different parts of this Body of Christ to do. If one part does not function, it affects the whole. If one part, (as small as tooth!) is hurting, the whole body can be debilitated. There is an organic equality in the body of Christ. All tasks are important.

Second, If one part of the body is not functioning, the rest of the body must compensate. In 1898, the Italian economist, Vilfredo Pareto showed that approximately 80% of the land in Italy was owned by 20% of the population; Pareto later observed that 20% of the peapods in his garden contained 80% of the peas. He soon applied these observations to other areas of life and it became known as the Pareto Principle. Sales people believe that 80% of their sales come from 20% of their clients. 80% of complaints come from 20% of the people, etc.

This principle seems to hold true for churches. 80% of the tasks are done by 20% of the people, likewise with financial support. My concern is that we have accepted this as the norm. It shouldn't be. PPC needs to address this reality in its common life. As your interim pastor, I have really grown to love my time here, and you have been most gracious to Karen and me. One of my observations as an relative outsider is that so much is done by so few. Some parts of the body that is PPC are over functioning and compensating for parts that aren't. The result will be fatigue, burnout, hurt feelings, and anger. As we move forward in

this time of transition, one of the challenges that we need to face in order to prepare for a new pastor, is getting all the parts of this Body functioning... working together.

Each of us brings gifts, skills, and energy. They are different, but they are all needed. Too often we identify the pastor or the other leaders of the church as the most important individual, but we are absolutely useless and cannot function effectively without people in the pews and behind the scenes who do their work faithfully. Their service to the Kingdom of Christ is as important as mine.

Third:

It speaks to our own sense of self-esteem. Each of you has a gift, an ability and a purpose here at PPC. Your role, your gift, your talent, your participation is essential to Poland Presbyterian Church. You have a role to play here. You have a calling to fulfill. It might not be the glamorous job that you think it should be, but it is vital to this congregation and I exhort you to fulfill it with joy.

Let me name just a few gifts that can be shared in an unofficial way... greeting one another with a welcoming smile. Seeking out the visitor, the stranger, and welcoming them. Daily keeping the staff and the leadership of PPC in your prayers. Singing a hymn. Helping in the kitchen for a funeral.

There are also many more "official" tasks: Teaching Sunday School, accepting a call to Elder or Deacon, serving on a committee, volunteering as a parent to assist with the children's program, singing in the choir, playing bells, ushering, and so many more. God has given you a gift to share with the community of faith, this Body of Christ. When you hold it back, the whole body is affected.

Let me close with a story from my first year as a pastor. I was asked to go to a moderate a session in a rural community of Missouri. There were 5 or 6 people on the session, all from farm families. I was a newly minted pastor, and I wanted to break the ice and get things going. After opening the meeting with a prayer, I asked each elder to share what their "gifts" and talents. One said she was a good bible teacher. Another shared his ability to keep the financial books. We then got to an elder at the other end of the table. He didn't seem to know how to smile and when it was his turn he said, "My gift is the ability to critique the young 'whipper-snapper' ministers they send here." I gulped and replied that was good.... In retrospect it was good, an important gift that enabled a "young whipper-snapper" minister to grow and mature. My grumpy elder was a part of "the whole body, joined and knit together ...each part working properly, promoting the body's growth in building itself up in love."

Each part working properly.... I leave you with a question: What is your part? What is your part in the Body of Christ?