

You are the Body of Christ
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13:29

“You are the Body of Christ” Pilgrim Church UCC, January 24, 2016, (1 Corinthians 12:12-31a)
Third Sunday after Epiphany

Let's go back to Game 6 of the 1986 World Series at Shea Stadium in Queens. The Mets are trailing the Red Sox 5-4 and are one out from finishing an amazing season with a disappointing loss. Mookie Wilson's at the plate and Red Sox pitcher Bob Stanley throws a wild pitch to bring Kevin Mitchell home. All of a sudden, the Mets and the Sox are tied in the bottom of the 10th inning—and then comes the infamous moment. Wilson has a full count and hits a grounder up the first-base line. Bill Buckner, the veteran first baseman, hobbles to field this ground ball and reaches down too late. The ball bounces between his legs and rolls right behind him. Ray Knight rounds third base for the Mets and heads home—leaping with joy. The Mets tie the series at three games apiece and go on to win the 1986 World Series.

The scapegoat for Boston sports fans became Bill Buckner. Some of you may be having flashbacks of anger, disappointment, heart palpitations, you name it just by hearing his name. And I understand—Cleveland fans have The Drive, The Fumble, and Red Right 88. What's fascinating is when Red Sox fans recall the missed opportunities of the past, people don't seem to speak as much about Bob Stanley's wild pitch which brought in the runner on third before Mookie Wilson even hit that grounder to Bill Buckner. Bill Buckner became the scapegoat. He later publicly stated, “Some murderers didn't face as much criticism as I did . . . I couldn't believe it. It's like I did nothing in my career except commit that error.”[1] ESPN reports it like this: “Buckner would finish with 2,715 career hits and a .289 career average in 22 seasons . . . In 1986, at the age of 37, he knocked in 102 runs on two brutally bad ankles that required him to wear high tops . . . yet he will only be remembered by many people for The Error.”[2]

Team sports can teach important lessons, lessons about leadership and how to be a good team mate (not just on a field or court or what have you.) Team sports can also be incredibly harsh and break your heart. All the participation trophies these days drive me nuts because kids may not learn how to be a good sport after a loss. They may not experience adversity and picking yourself up after that loss to keep trying your best. That's an important life lesson no matter your profession or background or family make-up.

Thankfully one can also learn how to deal with losses and adversity from playing an instrument and perhaps not always making first chair or trying out for plays and not always getting the lead role. Yet you can still be part of the band and part of the cast and put on an amazing performance where everyone works together to achieve something beautiful. There are plenty of other ways to learn how to be a good team mate and deal with losing and adversity besides just sports. Though learning these lessons early helps.

One of my basketball coaches always said that we win as a team and we lose as a team. Instead of making someone a scapegoat and blaming one person for a loss no matter what may have happened at the end of a given game—the challenge was to look at how you function as a team and as individuals within a team. It's easy to point to Bill Buckner blowing Game 6 of the 1986 World Series. That is so easy to say. But the truth is that within that game alone there were many factors that led to that team loss, including a wild pitch that was not thrown by Bill Buckner. The Red Sox lost as a team. To say it in a Biblical way: “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”[3] We

should ideally suffer and rejoice in unity, as a team. And for you Pats fans out there—hopefully the Pats win as a team later on today.

Part of what we can take from Paul's words this morning in 1 Corinthians is that when it comes to Church—we win and we lose as a team. As the Body of Christ, we are many members, we are diverse, and we are in this together. We're not all hands or feet or ears or eyes. If we were a football team, we're not all quarterbacks or wide receivers or linebackers. If we were an orchestra, we're not all violins or pianos or oboes. We have different gifts and passions. We are different people. Who wants to be part of a team or an orchestra where everyone's exactly the same? It just wouldn't work and it would be so boring! Having diverse gifts within the Body of Christ is necessary, and it's what makes us special as a congregation following in the Way of Jesus Christ.

Paul reminded the Early Church that we have Apostles, Prophets, Teachers, folks who perform deeds of power, healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, and various kinds of tongues. We don't all have the same gifts—God has established this diversity of gifts in the Body of Christ. Don't try to necessarily have one another's gifts and don't privilege some gifts over others. We need Apostles, Prophets, Teachers, and Healers just as we need hands, feet, eyes, and ears for our own human bodies. We're not all the same. We shouldn't all be the same. And this is a good thing!

Paul emphasized mutuality—that we need each other. When the Romans and Greeks used the body metaphor they would use it conservatively, saying that if the hands and mouth would revolt against the stomach, the body would die. The societal order that's been established is natural and good. If you're a hand be content with being a hand. Don't try to be a mouth, that's not your place. And it's your responsibility as the hand to feed the mouth, otherwise the body will starve.[4] Do you see how this can be used to keep the status quo in an unhealthy way?

Paul does the exact opposite reminding people, "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.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable." [5] Paul tried to teach us that we shouldn't prioritize eyes over hands or the head over feet. We can't say that we have no need of each other because it's just not true. And sometimes those members of the body that appear to be weak are of the utmost importance. Instead of thinking about who has the better gifts, let's consider that we're different and we need each other in order to be the Body of Christ. We win as a team and we lose as a team.

Two weeks ago, the Minnesota Vikings and the Seattle Seahawks were in a playoff game and the Vikings kicker Blair Walsh missed a 27-yard field goal that would have given the Vikings the lead as the game was nearing the end. The Vikings lost in a heartbreaker. Vikings fans took to Twitter to let Blair Walsh know how horrible he is and how he absolutely blew this game for the team. Sound familiar? One can only imagine what poor Bill Buckner would have endured if Twitter and Facebook had been around in 1986!

First-grade teacher Judie Offerdahl thought that this missed field goal would make a good teachable moment for her students in Blaine, Minnesota. This year they've been learning about what empathy means. Offerdahl asked the boys and girls to think of a time in their lives when they made a mistake and how it made them feel. And these first-graders wrote words of encouragement to cheer up the devastated kicker:

"Dear Blair Walsh, I know that it can be hard to get through things that are sad, but you have to try and try again. Everyone makes mistakes sometimes. One time I made a mistake when I

was doing a cartwheel. I felt embarrassed. You can still help the Vikings win the Super Bowl next year. Your fan, Sophia Doffin.”

“One time I had the same problem as you and we lost the divisional playoffs . . . You rock.” – Jacob DePoint

“You are handsome. Don’t worry. It’s just a game.” - William Ofori[6]

Blair Walsh received these notes of encouragement and was so touched that he visited the students at Northpoint Elementary School in Blaine, Minnesota. He spoke to the entire first grade class in person—signing autographs and taking pictures with the kids and teachers. Most importantly, he thanked them for writing such kind words to brighten up his day after such a hard moment in his career as an NFL player. Empathy is an important lesson, and how amazing for these children to have a powerful moment of empathy making a difference in a person’s life at such an early age. “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” We win as a team and we lose as a team.

In the end, there are many ways we can think of our congregation and the roles we may play and the gifts we may bring. Though Paul’s metaphor of the Body of Christ has lasted the test of time for a reason. It still works to think of ourselves as one body with many individual members. Different parts of the body make up the whole. And thank goodness we don’t have a body completely made of hands or feet or eyes or ears! Thankfully we have diversity within the body and various gifts we bring through those doors whenever we gather as the Body of Christ here at Pilgrim Church. The poignant words of Paul remain—when one member suffers, we all suffer. When one member rejoices, we all rejoice. We’re on this journey of faith together, and we’re on the same team. Thanks be to God! Amen.

[1] Rick Weinberg, “2: Buckner’s Error Completes Stunning Sox Collapse,” September 7, 2004, <http://espn.go.com/espn/espn25/story?page=moments/2>

[2] Ibid.

[3] 1 Corinthians 12:26.

[4] Footnotes for 1 Corinthians 12 in The Fully Revised Fourth Edition of the New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV.

[5] 1 Corinthians 12:21-22

[6] Vineeta Sawkar, “First-graders offer Vikings kicker Blair Walsh words of encouragement,” January 13, 2016, <http://www.startribune.com/first-graders-offer-vikings-kicker-blair-wals...>