

**ISAIAH 35:1-10**

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.  
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,  
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.  
They shall see the glory of the Lord,  
the majesty of our God.

3 Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.  
4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
'Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God.  
He will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.  
He will come and save you.'

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
6 then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.  
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;  
7 the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

8 A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God's people;  
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.  
9 No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.  
10 And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;

everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

### **COLOSSIANS 3:12-17**

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

### **SERMON**

All throughout the letters of Paul and others in the New Testament, we hear this image come up again and again. The Body of Christ. The Church is the Body of Christ. You are the Body of Christ. And in today's reading from the Letter to Colossus: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body." Paul has a great little extended riff on this metaphor in the first letter to the Corinthian church, "For 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....Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ... if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?"

I love the metaphor of the Body of Christ, because it works in such a foundational way. We're all part of one body, and each of us are a bit different. One ear here, another eye there, someone else is the

spleen. Together, we can do great things. It's a wonderful image, right? We can use it for an individual church, like each one of us is a different body part, we each have different gifts to bring, but together we create the church as whole community. Or, we could use it for the church universal, the church in this world. The Presbyterians, we might be up there in the brain somewhere, maybe the frontal lobe, because we're pretty awesome at organization and structure. I'm fairly certain my friends the Pentecostals would be the guts. Because, God bless them, they do emotional and visceral worship better than dang near anyone. The Catholics might be the hands, because one of their greatest strengths is the powerful witness they've provided in their outreach to the world through service. Think of all the hospitals, schools, social service organizations, and even great shareholder activism that comes from the Catholic church's service. We each have different strengths and weaknesses, and when they're brought together in unity, powerful work can be accomplished by the body as a whole.

This image also works for me because it brings up positive memories of my favorite horror movie as a kid. It was one of those black and white flicks from the 50s, totally silly, called "The Crawling Eye." Basically it's just one scene after another of this big, slimy eyeball with tentacles terrorizing an Alpine village. It's hysterical. But every time I read that line from Paul, "If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?" I can't help but imagine the crawling eye. And I think sometimes, as different denominations, or even as individuals in a church, we can kind of become that crawling eye, right? Like, it's easy and natural to think that somehow the gifts we bring as volunteers or the strengths of the Presbyterian Church

are all anyone really needs. If everyone would just be like us...if everyone would just agree with me...if only they would do it the way I'm telling them to do it... But the warning from Paul is real: there are different parts of a body for a reason. We can't just be one giant, crawling eye, we've got to work together bringing both our strengths and weaknesses, complimenting the work of others. It's a whole body, and it doesn't do anyone any good to be boastful or self-centered about the role we play.

But I think there's something more pernicious and dangerous that can happen to the body, and something far more realistic than simply thinking all you need is an eye. The Crawling Eye is the stuff of science fiction, but an autoimmune disease...that's a real thing. Paul, of course, didn't know about autoimmune diseases 2,000 years ago. But if he did, I promise you he would have used it as a metaphor.

There are tons and tons of different diseases out there called autoimmune diseases. What they all have in common is the fact that they're a disease where part of the body, your immune system, gets hoodwinked into thinking part of your normal body is a disease. Your own immune system gets to work fighting that thing it thinks is a disease, literally breaking down your own body. There are dozens, if not hundreds of these different diseases. Some of them are well known to us: rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease of the joints. Your immune system goes after the tissue in and around your joints, causing swelling, stiffness, and pain. There are so many of these diseases, the body attacking itself. And what's interesting about them, at least from my limited medical knowledge and some research this week, is that they're not really curable. When someone has an autoimmune disorder, the best medicine can

provide at this point is to control the symptoms with diet, exercise, lifestyle adjustments, medication, and surgery.

So, when it comes to the body of Christ, I wonder...as much as we might squawk about the eye or ear or brain being all important and central, that's sort of a made up issue. It's not possible, there are always going to be different body parts. There is no crawling eye. However...I wonder if the body of Christ suffers from an autoimmune disorder. Here me out on this one. It's one thing to sort of bleat about how important we are, I mean the disciples did that all the time. It's another thing entirely to actively engage in wounding and fighting another part of the body, and I wonder if we sometimes do that without realizing the damage we can cause.

Take this for example: church gossip. I've seen this in every church I've ever been in at some point or another. Sometimes it's pretty minor, some whispering about that ugly flower arrangement that Mrs. Doolittle made for Sunday worship. Sometimes it's major, a conflict around the pastor or the music minister being fired for some offense that the personnel committee can't talk about. In the church I grew up in there was a very serious situation with a youth leader abusing a student. Because of the nature of the situation, there were a lot of details that couldn't be shared with the congregation, the gossip ran rampant, and it was painful and damaging to the whole church, not to mention the teachers and students at a nearby junior high school who not only heard all the stories being told, but because of the stories got drawn into the church drama in unnecessary ways. Adults and students, members of the church and people who had never stepped foot in our door before, so many people were hurt by those words. That's an autoimmune disorder of the body of Christ. And gossip is such an easy trap to fall into, right?

It happens every time we speak about another church member instead of going directly to them for the truth. I know I've been guilty of it. And I'm ashamed of that, because it breaks down and harms the body...my body! My community! The people I claim to love! The God I purport to serve! But that's how autoimmune disorders work, right? We are really hurting ourselves.

And there are so many examples of this throughout the ages. Catholics and Protestants literally killing each other in any number of religious and political wars. That's the Body of Christ killing itself. Or the fights in the New Testament over who could eat which food. Again, the body hurting itself.

So the question for us is: how do we treat this disorder that seems to be a part of the body of Christ? It's been here since the beginning, you can find it as early as the letters of Paul. I'm not sure we're getting rid of the disease entirely, so how do we treat the symptoms? And to be really clear, I just want you all to know, Peoples Presbyterian is one of the kindest, most thoughtful, and healthiest congregations I've ever been a part of. I am proud of how we treat one another in this church, but I think it's always good to be reminded of how we should continue to live in peace, together. Paul had some advice for his people back then...and I think it's pretty good for us here, today, too:

First he tells us to put some clothes on. Keep the body warm and covered with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Essentially, put on the virtues you're seeing to embody.

Second, Paul tells us that we're going to have disagreements and complaints. That joint is just going to ache a bit when the rain is coming. So, just like God forgave each one of us, forgive each other. Be patient and kind to the body you have.

Third, in love, let the peace of Christ dwell in our hearts. And remind yourselves over and over again that you are one body. Together, we make a whole.

Fourth, be thankful. Express your gratitude for all that God has given you. Give thanks for those other parts of the body. The hands that changed the light bulb so you didn't have to think about it. The feet that chased the toddlers in the nursery. The stomach that created the fellowship hour treats. Be thankful for every part.

Finally, worship together. Sing your songs, ready your stories, pray your prayers, because in worshipping together, you'll remember who God is, and how we are called to live as one body. Honestly, this is why I love the Community Thanksgiving and Good Friday services so very much. It is so important that we gather together, across our differences, to remind ourselves how much more we have in common with one another. Worshiping in community is like insulin for a diabetic, it fills our body with something we need, something we were missing on our own.

So, let us together give thanks to God for this body we are blessed to be a part of. And let us do our part to maintain the peace of the whole. Thanks be to God.