

Body of Christ: Guts

Psalm 41, I Corinthians 12:20-26

Center Church

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Take a look at the hymn that we will sing following the sermon. Just read through it a minute. Did you stop at the first line? "Blest is the man whose bowels move" (and I assume those of any gender would be similarly blessed). You might say, "Well, certainly bowels that move regularly are a good thing, but what? In a hymn?" And then what's this last line: "Shall find the Lord has bowels, too."

I first discovered this hymn when I was working on my PhD dissertation. It cracked me up, and I absolutely had to find a way to include it in my book, even though it only slightly related to my topic. Isaac Watts wrote this hymn in 1718 or 19 as a paraphrase of Psalm 41, which you heard a few minutes ago. Oddly enough, the word "bowels" doesn't appear in the English translation of the Psalm.

So, what's the deal with bowels? Remember last week I talked about the belief in Bible times that the heart was the seat of intelligence and decision-making, more like what we think of as the brain's job. Well, both in those times and persisting well into the 19th century (and as we'll discuss later even to today), our innards, our guts (which includes the bowels) were understood to be the center of compassion, conscience (our inner voice to tell us what is good and true), and courage. Numerous times in the Psalms, the English translators substituted the word "heart" where the original Hebrew word is "liver" or "kidney" or, yes, "bowels." The hymn is not talking about the physiological function of our bowels, but rather our impulse to compassion. The person who acts out of compassion will find a partner in God, whose character is compassion. Makes a difference to know that before you sing!

We still use this imagery if you think about it. We talk about having a "gut feeling," which is often an intuition related to our

conscience about what is right or true. We talk about people being “gutsy,” by which we often mean courageous.

Paul makes clear that the Body of Christ needs every kind of gift there is, including what we attribute to our “guts,” or, as Paul puts it, those parts of the body that seem to be “less respectable,” or “weaker.” The guts are not as flashy as the hands or the brain, not as powerful as the heart, and yet, are critical to the functioning of the body of Christ, as they are to the human body.

The Body of Christ not only includes but needs all its parts, including those that perhaps the world considers weaker or not “presentable” or good looking or less “sexy” or cool. And the Body of Christ needs those parts to be full of compassion, conscience and courage for the good of the whole body!

My words today go out especially to those of you who think you are not as important to the church, to the world, maybe even to God. But I need the rest of you to listen carefully, too.

To those who think their gifts are “lesser,” and so often stay quiet and in the background here and elsewhere in their lives, I say to you today that you are critical to the work of God and the whole Body of Christ here at Center Church and out there where the work of the Church can be transformational in small and large ways. We need you because you are the ones who know about compassion, perhaps because you need compassion from others or you have received it and know how important that is to your well-being. We need you because often you carry a word from God for us to remind us who we are at our most basic, our conscience as a body. We need your courage as you navigate a world which often puts you down or ignores you altogether or threatens you.

Maybe you are perceived to be physically disabled, or mentally disabled. Maybe you are transgender or gender non-conforming. Maybe you are a shy person. Maybe you are financially poor. Maybe your own sense of self has been worn down by family

or the beating of the workings of the world, mental, emotional and physical, so that you have been convinced you are not beautiful enough or good enough at anything or worthy of love. Maybe you are elderly. Maybe you can think of other people who would fit this category.

I call you today to claim your critical part of the body of Christ! And I call the rest of the Body to pay attention to you! You are our guts, our seat of compassion, of conscience, of courage. We value you. You are worthy. We need you. The world needs what you have to give. God needs you.

I want to tell you a story about a woman I know named Pat. Pat is in her late 80's now, a very small woman, quiet in a crowd, easily overlooked. She is not highly educated, and she and her family have often lived just over the edge of poverty. She worked for years in nursing homes caring for people that, sometimes, the world looks at as less valuable, less worthy of love. She loved them. Her compassion and conscience called her to treat everyone with love and care, especially those who had no one else to take an interest in them, those deemed even less important than she was.

In my former church, many of us came to know Pat as what is sometimes called a "prayer warrior." Though I am not a big fan of bringing war imagery into our understanding of what we are to do, in Pat's case, this actually fits. She believes that she should be bold, courageous, in coming to God in prayer on behalf of other people. She insists God pay attention, much like the Psalmist in today's Psalm. Her prayers are gutsy and strong. I used to love to sit with Pat in her home as she asked me what I most needed to have her pray for, not only specific people in the church, but what **I** most needed her to pray for, for me. When I prayed with Pat, I really felt like we **prayed**. As she has aged and become physically unable to do much for herself or others, she still prays many times a day. I miss her.

I thought of Pat, oddly, this week when the scandal about college admissions cheating by the rich and famous broke. All these

people, most of whom were probably criticizing race-based affirmative action in admissions as unfair, were busy spending millions of dollars in bribes and cheating, just so their child could have an “impressive” college degree. As though that would make them more important to the world.

Pat does not have an impressive college degree. She has guts in the old-fashioned meaning of that word. Compassion, conscience, courage, persistence. You don't need millions of dollars for that, or impressive diplomas, or titles, or fame, or physical beauty, at least what the world defines as physical beauty.

Part of understanding ourselves as the Body of Christ involves claiming our particular gift to that body and exercising the gift God has given us. Paul writes “There are varieties of gifts, but....To **each** is given the power of the Spirit for the common good.” To each of us! No one is without a gift that the Body needs!!

Have you taken any time in your life to think about what God's gift is to you? What part of the body you might be? I encourage you to carve out some time this Lent, early morning, late at night, in the warmth of the spring days coming, to consider and claim your Spirit gift and power. And if, perhaps, you are the guts of this operation? Oh my, do we need your compassion, your conscience, and your courage. We honor you. Amen.