

Body Language

1 Corinthians 6:12-20 † First United Methodist Church, Des Moines
January 15, 2012

I don't know about you, but I squirmed a bit inwardly as I read the passage from First Corinthians to you this morning. Why in the world is Paul taking time to discuss prostitutes with the Christians in Corinth?

To understand why Paul raised this topic, it helps to know something about the city of Corinth. Situated on a narrow 6 mile wide isthmus overlooking two harbors, Corinth connected the Peloponnesian Peninsula with mainland Greece. By virtue of its location, Corinth controlled both north-south land traffic and east-west sea traffic, levying taxes on goods shipped both directions.

And, as often happens with a port city, it had a reputation for being a place where anything could be done. Athenians, perhaps a little jealous of the affluence of Corinth, invented words based on Corinth's reputation, which included the root word "korinth". To give a sense of Corinth's reputation, one of these neologisms meant "pimp" and another meant "prostitute". I am too easily embarrassed to share a third I found preparing for this sermon. By its reputation, you might say that what happened in Corinth stayed in Corinth.

The 40 or so members of the congregation Paul had started about 50 A.D. had easy access to about anything they might be tempted to do. As ordinary folks, the Corinthians were tempted by their darker cravings, as we all are.

Paul knew that. He had lived in Corinth for about 18 months when he started the church with a local couple, Priscilla and her husband, Aquilla. And, of course, Paul wrestled with his darker cravings, too.

Paul wanted to remind the members of the Corinthian congregation of something else they shared. They were baptized. For Paul, that changed everything. Through baptism, Paul believed, Christians become a part of the Body of Christ. As such their bodies were no longer their own. Their bodies were members of the Body of Christ.

Paul had taught the Corinthians this when he lived among them. It was familiar to them all, so there is more than a hint of sarcasm in Paul's question to them: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?"

Paul's question is also addressed to us, as baptized Christians. Our bodies are no longer exclusively our own. Our bodies, too, are members of the Body of Christ.

Which raises this question for each of us: "What language does my body speak?"

When other see us, what do they see? Do they see Christ? When others hear us, who do they hear? Do they hear Christ? When we help those in need, do they see Christ helping them?

What is our body language?

Francis of Assisi had a startling way of reminding his sisters and brothers in Christ that they were members of the Body of Christ. He would say, "You may be the only Gospel that your neighbor will ever read."

What we do matters. How we live matters. To others. To ourselves. To God.

That's why Paul takes time in this letter to talk about prostitution. His words to the Corinthians raise questions for us:

Do we live as God desires, as Samuel did: "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening"?

Do we speak love with our bodies, as Christ taught us and showed us?

To speak love with our bodies is not always easy, of course. We, too, are ordinary people. We, too, wrestle with our temptations.

We know how hard it is to make Christ's love visible to others through our bodies. As we struggle, there is something helpful we should remember: being members of the Body of Christ through our baptism is a relationship. It is mutual.

God does more than make us members of the Body of Christ and then leave us to muddle through as best we can. God does not abandon us to just our wisdom alone and just our strength alone and just our tenacity alone.

God gives himself to us. God goes with us, every minute, loving us from the inside out. God never stops giving himself to us, as Holy Breath breathing new life and new possibilities into us with every breath we take; as Christ's body and blood given to us in this bread and cup.

We must use all our wisdom, all our strength, all our tenacity to resist the darker cravings of our hearts. But we never rely on those alone. The help we need to speak love with our bodies is always near, closer to us than our breath. And that makes all the difference.

In the name of the One God, Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.