

CALLED TO THE COMMON GOOD

Ordinary Time

Corinthians 12:14-26

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Debra Jarvis, Writer in Residence
University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture:

Corinthians 12:14-26¹

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would 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? But as it is God arranged the members of the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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, and those members of the body that we think less honorable, we clothe with greater honor. And our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need them. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it. If one member is honored, all will rejoice together with it.

Rev. Debra Jarvis

Prayer

Holy One, open our hearts and our minds to your spirit and your Word, not just from this pulpit but from one another. And we thank you that you continue to love us and teach us through one another. – Amen.

It has been fifteen years since terrorists ran into the twin towers into New York City; fifteen years since the attack on the Pentagon; fifteen years since my cousin Andy Garcia was killed when flight 93 crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania; fifteen years since my husband Wes and I were in Manhattan on that day.

So this morning I'm going to talk about how the events of September 11th produced some of the same affects on us as aging does. *And* I'm going to talk about the Scripture reading. *And* I'm going to use the hoodie jacket as an analogy. *And* I'm going to tell you why our hopes and dreams need to be even bigger now than they were fifteen years ago.

¹ Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), 1989

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I was going to throw in climate change and farm-to-table produce, but I don't think we will have time.

So, fifteen years have gone by, and this Sunday the Scripture is about the body of Christ. It's a metaphor for living in community. It tells us that *everyone* is necessary and important – no one part is greater than the other. We pretty much know – it's almost like a guarantee – that most things that turn up in Scripture like this, it's not talked about unless there was a problem. So you can pretty much bet that the early church members were arguing among themselves about *who* was better and *who* was more important, right? or Paul wouldn't have even bothered.

It kind of slays me that there's all this talk about the hands and the eyes and the mouth and the nose being all important, but we know that the most power is in the bladder. So ... I'm just saying. You just look around this morning, and then you see that happen and you go "she was right."

Now I think we can agree that *everyone* is important and necessary to the body. But the more difficult question is "Who is the body?" Is it just those of us sitting here this morning? Is it everyone on the church roll? Maybe it's just all Christians. But here's what I think Jesus would say: I think Jesus would say, "It's everyone. It's everyone in the world. And everyone is necessary and important, and when one member of the world suffers, the whole body suffers."

So, lots of things have changed in fifteen years. We've *all* changed in fifteen years. I can safely say that no one here this morning has the same body that they had fifteen years ago. And I know for some people that's a good thing, because I've heard all about hip replacements and how great it is now, so it's not necessarily bad. It's just different. And we can only hope that our understanding and our compassion have grown, so that some of our judgments and opinions and perspectives have changed as well in the past fifteen years.

So what else has changed in fifteen year? Well I think because of the 9/11 attacks and the terrorist attacks since then, a couple of things that happened: We are now burdened with the fear, a fear of another attack, *but* at the same time we've also developed an awareness. And let's talk about the awareness first, because I think it's the flip side of the same coin. A friend of mine who lives here in Seattle told me that when her daughter was watching the TV coverage of September 11th, she turned to her mother and said, "How could they *hate* us so?"

But lots of people have always hated the United State; why, lots of countries! But we just never really knew it – until that day. And hopefully that awareness that we developed has caused us to change our behavior as a country, not only to avoid harm but also for the common good, to be a good world neighbor. We change our behavior because we're aware.

And, you know, we do this as individuals all the time. So, an elderly friend of mine just told me, she said, "You know my body just doesn't work like the way it used to. So I'm really careful now when I step up on a curb or step up on stairs. And I don't hear as well, so that's why I don't go to those blankety-blank highfalutin' restaurants with the high ceilings, 'cause I can't hear a darn thing." So she developed this awareness and then she changed her behavior to avoid harm; and this is healthy.

And as a country I think it's not a bad thing to be aware that we're not loved by everyone, and I hope that as a country we are now not as demanding and perhaps a little less arrogant. And as individuals it's important to know that not everyone loves Americans. When Wes and I travel to other countries,

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we just try to be a little kinder, a little more generous, a little more patient, because we know that not everyone likes us, and we don't want to add to that dislike. And those who dislike Americans in general, well, we hope that perhaps meeting two Americans in particular will change their minds. So you can see how this, this is a healthy awareness.

But fear, fear is different from awareness, especially the fear that has developed since September 11. And the place where our fear shows up in the biggest, most obvious way is *air travel*. I don't think it will ever be the same.

Right now, if you fly on an airplane, you have to go through security, which makes us feel *anything* but secure. Because we're now standing there shoeless and beltless with our hands over our heads, and maybe some TSA guys going through our carry-on and flinging underpants around, and it does *not* make you feel secure.

But all that security around air travel – that is just a manifestation of our fear. And I'm not saying that this is irrational or unwarranted, because *I* don't want to fly with people who are suicide bombers or carrying guns on the plane.

But along with the fear of terrorism and terrorists, many of us have developed a fear of the *OTHER* – not just terrorists: *OTHERS* who are simply different from us. And that is why there is talk of building a wall to keep *OTHERS* out. And that is why there is talk of deporting *OTHERS* who are already here, because they are different and we are fearful.

Fear can immobilize us. It can paralyze us and make us contract. And that makes our world very, very small. I watched this happen to my father as he aged. He died this summer just short of his 94th birthday. But it seemed that every year after about 85, he got more and more paranoid and fearful, until one of my *last* memories of him was watching him pace up and down our driveway. He was watching for me to return from my walk to Starbucks, which was two blocks from their house.

I came up, and he starts yelling at me, "There are all kinds of people out there! I don't want you leaving the house!" So fearful! And he certainly never did leave the house after that. And his world became the house and yard in which I grew up. And then it became just the house; and then it was just his bed. And then after he died, I'd like to think that his world got very big again -- but I think that's a whole nother sermon.

But then, you know, we all know people like Margaret Rose, who she's in her 90s and she's working here at the church! And she's living on her own and she's still swimming in Lake Washington! Holy smokes! She had physical limitations, but she worked hard to keep her world big. And she, she had fears but she didn't let them stop her. She just lived and lived and lived until she died.

So if you're waiting for the hoodie analogy here it comes. Fear can make us vulnerable and scared and cold inside. People often say I was frozen ... [inaudible]...

Okay. My lovely assistant will bring up my hoodie jacket. Thank you sweetheart. ... He's the best husband ever! Okay. So I have to stand behind her and I'm not very tall, but let me just show you why a hoodie is so attractive.

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So, fear can make us cold. We have an icy fear. And you put on something like this hoodie. Aah! Man! Look at this! I just have to step away here now. See. ... Okay. Zip it up, and that is so great. And you feel warm and comforted and cuddled and it's just the best. And then there there's the hood, which is the whole point! And so you put the hood up. Aah! ... I don't think I want to take it off now! So, this is great, right?

But here's the problem with having your hood up: You can't really hear very well. And you can't really *see* very well, because it's as if you have blinders on, right? And so your view becomes very narrow. And the other thing is that other people can't see us as well.

But when we take off our hoods, oh, my gosh, we can hear better and we can see widely and we can be known by others. Now I'm not saying that hoods are bad up. -- You know like Ecclesiastes: There's a time to mourn. There's a time to laugh. There's time to wear your hood down. And a time to wear your hood up, because -- kind of like wearing ear buds on an airplane -- sometimes a hoodie up means, "Don't bother me."

So I just want to point out -- and you, if you can't see it, you'll have to get up after the service and see it. -- This banner over here on this side, the lower one. It's a beautiful image. -- Ah. Actually I think you all should just and get up and go over there and look. We're not glued to these pews. --

There's Jesus sitting there eating his lunch with *his hood up*. Okay, now don't you think he just needed a minute? ... You know, "Those disciples they're such a pain and there's the crowds and there's the healings." There he is just like "I just want to have my bagel, and have some peace," sitting there with the hood up, eating. But I am *positive* that if you went out to him, he would just flip that hood back right away and say, "Here. You want some bagel?"



So there's a time and there's a place for the hood.

But we can see how fear causes so many of us to just contract and become somewhat permanently zipped up and hooded. And we, we may be this way because of our own personal fears and wounds or -- maybe -- we just have a general fear of the future that has caused us to make ourselves smaller and, in turn, make our hopes and our dreams smaller. But because we're all part of the body, our smaller dreams affect *everyone*.

Now most of us are not the kind of people that St. Paul is talking about, right? We're not arguing who's the eye and who's the mouth and we're not saying, "Oh, I'm so important." I don't think that that's what most people here are doing.

In fact, maybe it's just the opposite. Maybe we zipped up our jackets. We put on our hoodies and say maybe, "Well, I'm just a cuticle, so don't expect much." But whoever we are. Whatever ... *[I feel kind of like a monk and that makes me feel a little more holy. So. All right! ... I'm sure I've ruined my coiffure.]* ... Whatever gifts we have were important and necessary to the body. Maybe we say stuff like that because we're just insecure or lazy, but we're all part of the body and we suffer and rejoice together.

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Now, in the midst of some really horrifying world events, we have to make our hopes and dreams bigger. And you may ask, "Well, how is this possible?" And I'm here to tell you that we have some very good examples throughout history. I hope that you all had a chance to hear the prelude that was played this morning it was written by a French soldier, Olivier Massiaen, while he was in a Nazi prison camp.² Now wouldn't you think he would have the perfect excuse to just hunker down and keep up his hood. He's in a prison camp! That's the perfect reason to be bitter and feel betrayed by God. Instead, he writes this amazing piece of music, "Quartet for the End of Time." And it's not about his, his depression or his sadness or his despair. No. It's based on his faith. It's based on the vision of a mighty angel from the book of Revelation. He's a POW. And he made his dream bigger than ever. And his dream affected the common good and the whole body rejoices.

Now, just know that making your dreams bigger doesn't mean you have to accomplish more or produce more. It can mean that you live with more presence.

I used to work in a vocational school for disabled adults and one of the students I'll call Ronald, he had been at a company picnic with his family and there was a softball game for kids and adults. And so he was running with his daughter down the first base line. She was four years old. He's running with her. And he trips and he falls and he breaks his neck. And now he's a quadriplegic.

He talked to me about how he realized that before his fall he had just been going through the motions. He said, "You know, I'd go to work every day and then I played on the weekends like I was supposed to. But I felt like I was never really there." He said, "Now I'm awake. Now I'm awake." He could've zipped up his jacket and stayed under his hood forever. But now he lived his life with such *presence* you could *feel* it when you were with him! You could feel it. So perhaps for many of us, our bigger hope, our bigger dream is to live with this kind of unwavering presence.

A few months ago my friend, Nassim Assefi, she asked if I would to a podcast with her called "The Art of Risk." Well, I thought about it – for about 15 seconds – and said yes. So, we interview people who we think have made *gutsy* choices who have taken a risk to, maybe, advance their vision of the world or to become someone who they want to be. Not so much physical risk, but we were interested in people that have taken social, financial, maybe emotional risks.

One of the reasons we love doing this podcast is because we both believe that at *this time* in the world we need to be inspired to take more risks, to throw back our hoods, and unzip our jackets, and get out in the world. We both realized that life is precarious; and it's better to lose your life than to waste it.

Next week we're interviewing someone who took a lot of risks. She left an abusive marriage -- always risky -- started an AIDS organization in the 1980s in *Arkansas*. Then she moved to Washington State and helped build up another AIDS organization. Then, in her late 70s, raised enough money to make a film about preparing for death. Her world got small for a very short time. She did have two knee replacements this year. But as soon as she could, she opened it right up again. And the body rejoiced. Our risks, our hopes, and dreams affect us all.

² See Michael Linton (1908-1992), in First Things, Music for the End of Time. See <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1998/11/004-music-for-the-end-of-time> (referenced 11/10/2016)

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So! All of us can see this banner of Jesus here. I love this. He's like this, "Come on! I want you to follow me!" That crazy guy. What a risk taker! What a *dreamer*, right? We know that from the gospel. And, if we follow Jesus, then that's what we're called to do to. So what are our dreams? What are our hopes? How can we make them bigger? How can we live with more presence and love and compassion?

We have to go out and take risks, because the world will only be healed if we are bold, if our dreams are big, and we act with great love and great understanding. *Everyone* is important and necessary. And for those of you who feel constricted by your age, remember this: you have wisdom; you have experience. And we all, we all have one another and we all have God.

Amen

UCUCC: DJ

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2016/11/17/2016