

Luke 4:14-21

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

¹²For 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. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If 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. ¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The 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." ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and 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; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But strive for the greater gifts.

SERMON

A few weeks ago John and I were watching old episodes of the television show “Parts Unknown.” If you don’t watch it, you should. The show was on CNN and featured the writer and chef Anthony Bourdain travelling the world, learning about the food, culture, politics, and music of all sorts of different countries, and meeting the wackiest assortment of local folks you could imagine. I love the show because I love food and travel, but what made it unique really was Tony Bourdain. He had the incredible ability to be a little snide to those in power, incredibly kind to the everyday person he met, and somehow package it all up with a good dose of acerbic wit. You’re more likely in any episode to find him dining at the kitchen table of the janitor of the prime minister than in the banquet halls of government. It really is fantastic and human and beautiful.

So, we were watching an episode about Antarctica, which I know doesn’t sound like much of a food mecca. And you’re right. The food on the episode was far less impressive than usual. However, the culture and work and people Tony met and explored at both the McMurdo station on the Ross Ice Shelf and the Amundsen-Scott research station at the south pole, they were completely captivating. As soon as he arrives he notes that there’s not a single piece of litter on the ground across this small town that houses over 1200 scientists and support staff. I suppose as a resident of New York City, this really was shocking to him, but it makes sense, right? Every bit of trash, even down to human waste, is collected, carefully packaged, and sent back to the United States for proper disposal.

The entire station runs like a carefully oiled and tended machine, everyone has a job, and they do it well. The 200-odd scientists are off collecting and tagging ice fish or recording the movement of glaciers or whatever. But to make their work possible, there are over 1000 folks who support the mere existence of the station. There are cooks and janitors, there are drivers for the gigantic vehicles that drive folks to and from the airfield and other locations. There are carpenters and engineers, electricians and plumbers, communications and IT professionals. There’s even a little tiny radio station people take turns DJing for. And the perspective you get, as Tony Bourdain wanders around interviewing and eating with all sorts of random folks at McMurdo is that the entire station is a sort of peaceable science utopia. There’s no sense of hierarchy between residents. The job of the person who collects and packages the trash for export is seen as just as valuable as the one cooking up dinner for 1200 or the PhDs tracking climate change through ice measurements.

And I loved it. I loved seeing this place—even knowing it was probably a bit of an idealized version of events—a place where everyone’s contributions were valued and respected. Where individuals worked together, not just because they were getting paid or because the

scientists needed support, but because when you're living on a polar ice shelf your survival depends upon the work of others. You need food and heat and shelter and a ride to the plane and working telephones.

And I filed this whole story away in the back of my mind as a really great image for this passage from Corinthians, the body of Christ. Where the eye needs the hand, and in turn the hand needs the nose. The nose depends upon the brain and the brain wouldn't survive without the heart. So it is with the Body of Christ—we are all different, and yet we depend upon one another. The ice fish scientist cannot survive without the janitor, and the janitor needs the carpenter, and the carpenter needs the cook. On and on it goes. Such is the Kingdom of God—where each of us has a place, a job, a way of being. We are each worthy of respect for the contributions we make, and together, when our powers combine, we are able to accomplish far more than the sum of our individual parts. We are the body of Christ. Yadda yadda yadda.

I love this message, because it makes me feel good. Ok, I have a place, the work I am doing, no matter how humble it sometimes feels, it matters, and it can be part of God's working in this world. I matter! My work matters! I have a place and a role! But there's a major flaw in this reading, one that I personally have been ignorant of for as long as I've read it. One I'm sure many of you may be missing as well. And to get there, I'd like to chat about the body, and in particular, the appendix.

You all know the appendix, right? Next door neighbor of the colon? Long known as a vestigial organ, left over from some past evolutionary iteration of humanity? Most commonly spoken of only when it's infected and requires an appendectomy? That appendix. The humble appendix. Who wants to be the appendix in the body of Christ? No one. It doesn't do anything, it doesn't produce anything, it's just sort of...there. At best it's silent, at worst an untreated infection can kill you. Ugh, the appendix. And if you think this, you're not wrong.

But lately there's a bit of a sea change occurring for the fortunes of the appendix. There's a growing body of research showing that the appendix is actually super important for the health of our guts. It turns out, the appendix might be the body's library for good bacteria. See, all of us have tons of good bacteria in our guts that help us digest food and uptake nutrients and do all the things our bodies need to do. When we get sick our bodies are pretty good at flushing out a lot of bacteria—the good and the bad, and if you take antibiotics, those can wipe out a lot of your good, friendly little bacterial friends. And it takes time to get them back again. You all know this, right? If you take antibiotics, it just takes a while to feel normal again, right?

But it turns out that part of our bodies' ability to return to normal might be thanks to the appendix. That little library of good bacteria lives happily in the appendix and tends to be sheltered from the wipeout of antibiotics and illness. So, when your body is better, the bacteria from the appendix can recolonize your colon and help you get back to normal. There's more research to be done, but the more scientists look at your guts, the more it looks like the appendix isn't as vestigial as we might have thought.

And this, the dismissal of the appendix, is exactly the flaw with my reading of the Body of Christ. I've loved this passage for years because it makes me—a doer—feel useful and important. It makes me feel like I matter because I have a job to do, and I'm going to do that work well. I am a thumb, and I am going to work my hardest to grasp and grip and do all the good things a thumb should do. I am a pastor, I'm defined by my work. I raise children and I cook and I read and I watch television about food and travel. Some of those are hobbies, to be sure, but this is something I do all the time. Most of us do! We define ourselves and our worth by the work that we do. The output of our time and energy. What we are able to produce. And we live in a world where this is the measuring stick we are taught to use. How useful are we? What is our productivity level? What is our output? How are we making the world better, brighter, more livable? We are defined by our ability to do and to produce.

But not the appendix. The humble appendix, which we have been pleased to cut out and do away with for generations. It didn't matter, because it didn't have a job. It didn't contribute in a way we could see or understand. Its value was negligible. But it turns out, maybe we were wrong? Maybe it is important. Not because it pumps blood or converts electrical signals into muscular movement, but simply because it exists. It's a nice little pouch, in just the right place, where a few good bacteria can be stored up for a rainy day. It doesn't do, it just is.

And I wonder if we have a lot to learn about our value and worth from the little appendix. It's not that doing things or being productive is bad. Not at all! It's great to do cool things and work hard and create and all that. But it's problematic when that doing becomes equivalent to our value. That's damaging to ourselves—because it reduces each one of us to nothing more than our output. But even moreso, it's an ageist and ableist reading of scripture, because it tells others that their only value to God is in what they can do. "Doing" and "being productive" are factors of our age, our knowledge, and the ability of our bodies. Infants aren't terribly productive...they just sort of are. And as all of us age, our bodies become limited in what we can continue to do, we move more deeply into a state of being. Or, for the 1 in 5 folks in the United States whose bodies carry any form of illness or disability, they live every day in a world that says that whatever they "do" it's not as good, not as much as those of us who are able bodied. If the body of Christ is about productivity, we're not just ignoring a vast swath of humanity, we're actually telling them that they don't have a place in the body of Christ. Which is horrific theology.

Because the body of Christ isn't about the value of the work each part does. Body of Christ theology, read properly, says that as a whole, as the body of Christ, Christ is able to accomplish great work in this world...and all of us? The ear, the eye, the arm, the appendix? We get to be a part of that work. Not because of what we do...but because of who we are. Because we exist.

That's a much healthier reading of this text—to focus on the being rather than the doing. And it's a hard reading for me—a type A, top shelf do-er. But it's a better reading for all of us, because life is full of surprises, right? And a deep knowledge that we are loved and

appreciated and honored as part of the body because of who we are, rather than what we can accomplish or do? That's a sturdier theology any day of the week. And it make me, for one, a little bit more connected to my appendix...the exemplar of the hope that simply being is enough.