

“Belonging and the Body of Christ”

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Less than forty-eight hours ago, I was in the air, returning from Germany. We were there for two and a half weeks while my husband had artificial discs inserted into his spine. Lest you think we travel abroad for all our medical needs, let me dispel that idea. In the past year, here in Utah, he has had multiple injections, nerve blocks, and two surgeries. While some of his symptoms improved after the first surgery, others got worse. The trauma of a second surgery proved to be more than double the difficulty for recovery. His pain after the second was so intense we wondered if he’d ever be able to get out of the house again, let alone resume his normal life. So, after nine months of convalescence without anything resembling wholeness, we flew overseas for a third surgery for that elusive healing.

It’s been nearly one year to the day since two of his discs ruptured, causing us to shift gears towards a life that is almost unrecognizable from the one we were living before. Add to that a couple of daughters with autoimmune disorders, and a slew of mental health struggles across the family, and you might not be surprised that my mind is consumed with thoughts of the body. How can I comfort, nourish, soothe, and support the bodies of the people I love? I have learned, often the hard way, that bodies and spirits are interconnected. As the Doctrine and Covenants teaches, “the Spirit and the body are the soul of man”¹. Life—spiritual and temporal—often comes down to the body. We wrestle with our relationships to our own bodies, to others’ bodies, and to the collective body of Christ.

In one of his letters to the Corinthian saints, Paul uses the image of the body to create a beautiful metaphor for the way we ought to consider gathering, unity, and membership in this divine community we call the church.² I feel like I understand this metaphor a little more clearly these days. I don’t think Paul was imagining the body in its perfect, exalted form. Rather, I think he

understood how broken and bruised ours often are, and how incredibly challenging maintaining a body can be. Most ancient people did. 1 Corinthians 12:12 reads, “For as the body is one and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many are one body: so also is Christ. For by one spirit are we all baptized into one body whether we be Jews or gentiles; whether we be bond or free, and have been all made to drink into one spirit.”

Rephrased in today’s vernacular, this verse could read that belonging in the church—the body of Christ—must transcend differences in politics, gender, race, and so many others. The messiness of diversity is the whole point of this body metaphor!

We are prone to miss this. Sometimes, we tend to see hoped-for unity in the body of Christ as little more than an opportunity to bring “outsiders” into the fold to help them to become more like us. But what if the point is that the differences in each of us are the essential parts? Think of all the molds you may have tried to fit into. The pressures to “fit in” or conform to an imagined ideal are real and for some of us they can be suffocating. But if God intended the Church as some kind of cookie-cutter factory for identical disciples, why the body metaphor? Paul seemed to be getting at something deeper, something that placed greater value on our uniqueness. He sensed God’s design in our individual creation and identity. The metaphor’s power comes in its acknowledgement that we are inherently different in some ways ... and those differences enrich rather than weaken the body. A body made up of eyes only would be literally nonsensical.

Verse 17 reads, “if the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?”³ An overabundance of one sense would leave us wanting.

In verse 19, “And if they were all one member, where were the body?”⁴ Paul’s metaphor sought not an erasure of difference, but a harmony of difference. We must not read “unity” as “sameness,” in other words. Our individuality matters to God as our father, no doubt, but Paul here is teaching that individuality matters to the church, too.

And if that is true, then our differences are not an obstacle to overcome, they are vital to the health and power of God’s kingdom. Our differences are gifts from a wise and loving creator. I think this was what Paul was writing about in verse 21. “And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee; nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble are necessary: And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, upon these we bestow more abundant honor and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness.”⁵

This point is critical. What we might be tempted to see as ugly or unimportant is actually essential. A change of vision is needed. We actually need to see those “less comely” parts more clearly in order to understand their importance—the greatness and beauty in their difference! Paul seems convinced that God does not share our tendency to devalue difference. Rather, he contends that God’s redemptive work uplifts what we would ignore or disregard. The key is this: God puts those apparent weaknesses to work for the good of others. “For God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honor to that part which lacked.”⁶

Paul's is a message of inclusivity and then some. This is a unity not simply of celebrating differences, but of those differences being essential to the vitality of the whole. We are thus tasked with both finding the beauty in diversity and seeing its role in God's exaltation of the human family. God created a church and thereby made us indispensable to each other. By restoring a church and not just the gospel, he continually reveals himself through individuals as much as to individuals. We need each other. We are all eyes in want of ears and hands.

Our indispensability to each other is made clear in the scripture's enumeration of spiritual gifts. We get lists of divine gifts in several places in the scriptures, but they all make the same point. One person is given one gift and one another ... on purpose! Why this parceling out of divine gifts? "[T]hat all may be profited thereby"⁷. I might have a gift that enriches you and you might have one that blesses me. That's the miracle of the restored church. We need each other. This arrangement makes it difficult to live the gospel in isolation. This is surely why God gathers his people together. We find strength in one another. We find solace and comfort and support from one another.

I am well aware that not everyone feels this way in their wards or families or neighborhoods. I'm certain, however, that this is the ideal for which we can all strive. I am convinced it's a central purpose of the restoration. I know that our uniqueness can be a source of burden because we can feel alone in it. But it's that very uniqueness that creates and makes the body of Christ. I have something to give that no one else can give. It's natural to think, "I would give if I were more like her, or less depressed, if my life wasn't such a mess, or if I weren't so alone." The scriptures, however, are asking us to understand that it's our experience with loneliness, messiness or depression, that can strengthen the whole. Often, it is through others that Christ will teach me about the gospel and his attributes on a much deeper level.

I want to pause and reconsider our individual bodies again for a minute. Even when everything is running smoothly, the processes keeping us alive are messy. They include blood and guts, tubes and slimy pumps, mucous, and toenails. So it is that being a part of Christ's body can be a messy business. What if you're a toenail and you feel judged by those lovely eyes? Or a thumb in the midst of elegant ringed fingers. And yet, toenails make many of our movements more comfortable and those fingers are pretty useless without that opposable thumb.

Friends have told me of their loneliness in their wards, the alienation they feel when they are the childless one, the too old or too young, the political outlier, the chronically ill, the mother of the inactive kids, the divorced one, the one in an abusive relationship, or the one who is just so exhausted she doesn't even want to try any more. They don't feel like it's possible to fit in with the happily married, those with the brilliant children, and those with a clean house where piano is practiced, hot meals abound, and service is the order of the day. Those apparently tidier lives are those of the beating heart of the body, right? And the struggling ones seem like the toenails or thumbs? But my friends, if we were all the beating heart, where were the seeing? If all eyes, where was the smelling? If all skin, where were those protective toenails?

For some, the challenge is seeing others as lifted up by God when they don't seem to fit in. For others of us, the real test is seeing beauty and value in ourselves. Paul's metaphor should hit

close to home for those of us who feel “less than.” If we consider ourselves the uncomely part, our task is to better understand that God is trying to honor and lift us up, too.

And so we are called to join together in this beautiful, messy body with all of its seemingly strong or broken parts. What might it look like for the heart to minister to the hand? The heart may not really understand the hand. It’s so busy pumping and maintaining life. And the hand, well. It’s holding, washing, carrying and touching. How can they relate if they are so different? I believe that the first and second commandments—to Love God and to love our neighbor—create the framework for becoming the member God intends us to be.⁸ These commandments reveal that the foundational Christlike attribute is love. Our wards and families are the laboratories for developing Christlike attributes. And by the way, I don’t think laboratories are easy and straightforward places! Trying and failing and trying again seem to be their hallmark!

Introverts like me find it much easier to love from a comfortable distance. However, mourning with those who mourn, and comforting those who stand in need of comfort cannot be done from a comfortable distance. That great commandment can only be kept, that key attribute only developed, within the messy, uncomfortable living of the body. It is really hard work for some of us—pushing so far out of our comfort zones! I have found that love often grows up through the cracks when we clear away the rubble of our brokenness, or the brokenness of those to whom we minister, and let the light of God’s love in. I have found that love begets love. Or, in other words, when we practice the Christlike attribute of love out of obedience to his great commandment, that practice engenders growth and inspires the development of more love and other attributes. Again, it is hard to obey the second great commandment in isolation. Living in communities and families is a prerequisite to keeping it. We cannot hope to become true disciples without one another.

Speaking of the cracks that make space for God’s penetrating light, I want to show you a picture of one of the most sacred spaces I’ve ever been in. It’s the shell of what was the Coventry Cathedral in central England. The earliest parts of this cathedral were erected in the 11th century. Building continued through the centuries until November 14, 1940, it was bombed by the Luftwaffe during World War II’s infamous “Blitz” that reduced some English cities to rubble.

“Over 500 tons of bombs were dropped in one night, 568 people were killed, and much of the city center flattened. Provost Richard Howard, who fought the fires during the night of November 14 while the building was ablaze, declared the very next day that it would rise again. Not in defiance or memorial, but in friendship and reconciliation”⁹

Today, a beautiful modern cathedral stands—next to the ruins—a realization of his declaration. But it was in the ruins themselves where I felt that I was in a most holy and sacred space. Near one end of the cathedral ruins, a cross stands, fashioned from the medieval materials of the old structure. The words “Father Forgive”¹⁰ now adorn the sanctuary wall. It is a broken space, it is true. But that does not detract from my sense of God’s presence there. Nearly decimated by war, the stunning remains stand as a moving symbol of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Such beauty has sprung from the rubble. So much light shines from its gaping cracks. That sacred space has become its own metaphor for me. It symbolizes what God does in the brokenness of

our lives. I look out at you, some of you dear friends whom I've known forever, and I see the glow of lives polished in the fires of so much pain.

Somewhere during my gospel upbringing, I adopted the myth that doing everything right (scripture reading, daily prayers, temple attendance, family home evening, etc.) would lead uncomplicatedly to the attainment of Christlike attributes and their resulting joy. In my adolescent mind, joy meant a happy family (i.e., no one has problems) and a comfortable life (i.e., no worries about health or pain or money). Joy in my young mind equated, essentially, to the absence of real-world problems. I figured those who appeared to be the picture of the happy Latter-day Saint family must be the "winners" of gospel living. It was a fictive world where righteousness spares us trouble of any kind. Where did this myth come from? Was it a misinterpretation of the "prosperity" verses in the Book of Mormon? Was it overlyrosy church lessons? Was I missing some balancing messages along the way? Regardless of where the fault lies, I've found that many of us find sooner rather than later that the blessings of the gospel and becoming like the Savior don't manifest in simplistically formulaic ways. Sometimes our lives resemble the decimated remains of a war zone, our good intentions and righteous striving notwithstanding.

Without experiencing suffering, we might find it difficult to relate to others and keep the commandment to love our neighbors, who are likely suffering in their own ways. If we really know our neighbors, we will likely see their suffering. While I am not convinced that God intends human suffering in every case, I have discovered that it can be fertile ground for the development of Christlike attributes. Life's hardships can even comprise the critical environments for real seeds of joy to grow. Without a theology of suffering, we can find ourselves casting about, wondering why the world has done us wrong.

Every one of us knows someone who has no business being as peaceful as they are. Inevitably, they are humble. I don't mean the false-modest acknowledgement of a weakness or two; I mean the kind of humility that often grows from the cracks of brokenness. It is the kind of broken heartedness that recognizes that without the Savior's healing love, we are nothing. Can we reimagine our broken parts? Can we let God's redemptive work reach our deepest disappointments or struggles?

Instead of problems to be solved, can we see our rough patches as fertile ground where the attributes of the Savior can grow in us and even flourish? And when, in admiration, we want to emulate an attribute lived by one of our neighbors, can we recognize the struggle it might have been to develop that attribute rather than seeing it as a gift they were given, and we were denied?

As *The Family: A Proclamation to the World* states, that there is divine light in everyone, then God's light is all around us. The scriptures are an abundant source for learning about the Savior's attributes.¹¹ In addition to the scriptures, I am suggesting that God's children, all around us, are sources of light and learning themselves. The body of Christ itself is a storehouse of witnesses of God's work in the world. It's hard to step outside of ourselves. Life is often lonely. We see through a glass darkly. Hence the second great commandment! It's not only important but mandatory to learn from someone else's experience. The eye can't say to the ear, I have no need

of you. God hasn't told us to withdraw in solitude to become more like him. His command to love one another is not only for the uplift of those around us, it is for us. We are redeemed and sanctified in the process of loving. The great commandments reshape and refine us and ultimately exalt us.

In conclusion, I want to underscore the truth that there is not one story of following the Savior. There are as many stories as there are people. The stories will not all look exactly alike. Even as each are touched by the same divine love, they will reflect the uniqueness of our lives and experiences, too. Because of this, we can be more generous with ourselves and others when our striving or experience doesn't resemble those of the people around us. We can be more patient and hopeful if it seems like we or others are in different places on the covenant path.

Sister Reyna Aburto said, "my fellow disciples of Christ, let us not underestimate the marvelous work the Lord is doing through us, despite our shortcomings. Sometimes we are givers and sometimes we are receivers, but we are all one family in Christ."¹² And lastly, I cannot help but include a last word from Sister Monica Joan, a character from one of our favorite shows, *Call the Midwife*¹³, who profoundly quipped that "the hands of the Almighty are so often found at the end of our own arms."

Might our focus on the development of Christlike attributes open our eyes to the potential born of suffering, the fertility of brokenness, the beauty of diversity, and the power within us to live the gospel in such a way that we help change the world.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

¹ Doctrine & Covenants 88:15.

² See 1 Corinthians 12: 12-30.

³ 1 Corinthians 12:17.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:19.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:22-23.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:24.

⁷ Doctrine & Covenants 46:12.

⁸ See Matthew 22.

⁹ See <https://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/heritage/history>.

¹⁰ Luke 23:34.

¹¹ See The Family: A Proclamation to the World.

¹² Reyna I. Aburto, "We Are the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," April 2022.

¹³ Call the Midwife (TV series) by PBS