

*God incarnate, help us to see you at work in all of your children, and give us courage to be your hands and feet in this world. Amen.*

I was 14 years old when my grandfather was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. None of us kids were actually told about it then. We just played around at the family reunion while our parents and grandparents went into a meeting together and everyone came out kind of depressed. It was years before I learned that it was the meeting that day when my grandfather informed his kids of his diagnosis.

I was 31 years old when my grandfather died. He had lived with Alzheimer's for 17 years. I remember the last time he called me by name, a couple of years earlier. I remember him at my grandma's funeral, when she surprised us all by dying before him. My grandfather wouldn't have been able to tell you her name, but he knew that the most important person in his world would be there no longer.

My experience is not unique. As average life expectancies stretch toward 80 years for Americans – and into the mid-80s for those who have already lived to age 65 – more and more of us are having intimate experiences with dementia in our lives or the lives of our loved ones.

People we have known at the most generative stages of their lives slowly stop contributing to society in the ways we traditionally value. They don't earn money, they struggle to have conversation, and eventually cannot even control their basic bodily functions.

When this happens, and when we are at our best, we find ways for our loved ones to continue to live a life of dignity. We treat them with respect. We honor them and continue to treat them as human beings, even when we can't understand them anymore.

This is how it is meant to be with all of God's children.

Today's reading from First Corinthians reminds us that each one of us is an invaluable member of the body of Christ.

If any of us were absent, it would be as though Jesus himself were missing an essential part of his body.

“For 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.” (1 Cor 12:12)

Let's be careful how we use body of Christ imagery, though. This week some colleagues helped me realize that First Corinthians 12 has occasionally been used in able-ist ways, to marginalize people who are living with disabilities.

To say that the body of Christ isn't complete if it's missing a finger or a kidney is to imply that people who were born with less than 10 fingers or who lost a kidney due to illness are somehow incomplete.

I'm sure that many of us have used Paul's words in this way before. Jesus needs you to be part of the body, or the church will be missing a limb!

But one of the values that this congregation has always prioritized is to look at the world from the point of view of people whose voices have been historically marginalized.

We have been trying our best to support LGBTQ+ folks for many years.

More recently we've worked on actively combatting racism. We've been learning from people who were formerly incarcerated. We've heard some stories of people who fled violence in their hometowns only to be detained at the US border.

I am grateful today that my siblings in Christ have encouraged me to look at this passage from First Corinthians from the point of view of a person living with disabilities, and I invite you to join me in using that particular lens of interpretation.

Imagine with me today, that the body of Christ looks like the person you love most in the world.

That person might be tall or short, skinny or carrying a few extra pounds, neurotypical or on the autism spectrum. Your loved one may use a wheelchair or be hard of hearing. They may wear glasses or dentures, and perhaps they've had their knee or hip replaced. Your loved one might have been born with less than 10 fingers or toes – or maybe an accident caused them to lose one later in life. This person might live with fibromyalgia or diabetes or depression or bipolar disorder.

Imagine your loved one, imperfect human that they are, still worthy of your unconditional love.

The body of Christ looks like that.

Now imagine all the things that your loved one can do in the world.

My grandfather could still dance with me until a couple of months before he died – and the staff at his care facility loved to see it!

Can your loved one tell a joke? Give a hug? Paint or knit or read aloud to you? Does your loved one bake the best chocolate chip cookies in the world? Are they employed outside the home, bringing in a paycheck? Do they give awesome horsey rides to the grandkids?

All of those things, and countless others, are valuable contributions to the body of Christ, by essential members of the body of Christ.

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." (1 Cor 12:21)

The able-bodied person cannot say to the person in a wheelchair, I don't need you. Nor can the person with vision impairment say to the person with hearing impairment, I have no need of you.

The person with a job cannot say to the person who's unemployed, I don't need you. Nor can the person who's housing insecure say to the person who owns three homes, 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 this. 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. (1 Cor 12:22-25)

Society tends to value particular ways of being human. People who are well-educated, able-bodied, neurotypical, and heterosexual find far fewer barriers to success than those who don't fit those norms.

Thankfully, the body of Christ doesn't work that way.

The body of Christ sometimes looks like a girl who lives with cerebral palsy and can't reliably control her own body's movements.

But without her, Christ's work couldn't be done in this world.

God wants each one of us to contribute what we can to the mission of the church, to the ministry of Jesus, to the advancement of the kin-dom of God.

It doesn't matter whether your contributions are things that would be traditionally valued by society or not.

God wants to hear from trans folk and refugees, from children and elders, from people who are incarcerated and from politicians.

Each human being was created in the image of God, and so each person's contribution is necessary for the body of Christ to be complete.

When I was studying psychology, I remember a particularly fascinating study on attractiveness. There are some general facial characteristics that a lot of people find attractive. But if you merge together many different faces, taking the average of the eye color and nose width and skin tone, and create a new hybrid face, nearly everyone will find the fabricated face to be more attractive than any of the faces that went in to making it. The more people that you have contributing to an image of humanity, the more complete and beautiful that image becomes.

The body of Christ doesn't look like Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian man, with his perfect symmetry and proportions.

The body of Christ looks like that image of hundreds of faces all melded together until they begin to shine forth the very image of God.

It is the responsibility of the church to recognize that image of God, even when it shows up in people whom society undervalues.

It is our calling to treat all of God's children in the way that we treat our beloved friends and family when dementia has stolen away their memories of us, but we still honor them and offer them dignity.

Every single human being is worthy of that respect, regardless of age, race, ethnicity, gender identity, body shape, physical ability, mental health, education level, employment status, or any other measure that you can think of.

Every single child of God is necessary in order for Christ's work to be done in this world.

As members of the body of Christ, our job is to value others as the people God created them to be.

If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Cor 12:26-27)

For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. (1 Cor 12:13a)

As we honor those who are most dear to us, we are also called to honor all people as members of the body of Christ.

My prayer for us this week is that, whenever we look into the face of another person, we would recognize God looking back at us, and that we would honor all people as we would honor God in our midst.

And may the God who created us all in the divine image help us to recognize that image in others.

Amen.