

Luke 4:14-21
 I Corinthians 12:12-31a
 27 January 2013

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“Jealous Feet”

A Sunday School class had to memorize Psalm 23. The teacher gave the children a month to learn it. No matter how hard he tried, one young boy just couldn't remember the of Psalm 23. After much practice, he could barely get past the first line.

On the day that the children were scheduled to recite the Psalm in front of the congregation, our young boy was very nervous but nothing was going to stop him. When it was his turn, he stepped up to the microphone and said proudly, "The Lord is my Shepherd, and that's all I need to know.

People going into the ministry often get asked the question: What is your favorite Bible passage? It's a great way to get to know the heart of someone's ministry. If our gospel writer, Luke, was asked this question, he very likely would have chosen this passage we heard today.

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 [Jesus] 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.”

Luke could have summed everything up about Jesus that in one sentence. Instead, he gave us the written “instant replay” because it's necessary to know where these words came from. He want us to know that “. . . Jesus isn't just making this stuff up. [He] situates his ministry in the ongoing promise and commitment of God, to the lowliest of God's servants, to those who fear God from generation to generation, to the hungry, to God's people Israel, to Abraham and Sarah. Karoline Lewis, Associate Professor of Preaching and Alvin N. Rogness Chair of Homiletics, Luther Seminary St. Paul, MN

From the beginning of his gospel, Luke emphasizes Jesus' ministry to the poor – and poor covers a lot of ground – from spiritual to physical to financial need. This text is about more than that - it tells us in a nutshell who Jesus is, what Jesus will do, and for whom Jesus has come. The implication is that if we consider ourselves followers of Jesus, these are the verses to revisit time and time again. This passage give us the primary question of faith: “Who needs attention and compassion?”

Paul may have had this question in mind when he wrote that first letter to the church in Corinth. It seems the church had forgotten who they were following. There was a lot of dissension and some pretty immoral behavior. Part of it stemmed from their differing beliefs. Sit down with I Corinthians sometime – you will see that Paul addresses a variety concerns. Why was the congregation so confused about what to believe? One of the reasons is that the Corinthians didn't have one big building where they met for worship. Church was held in various homes – from wealthiest to the poorest. You can imagine the cliques and groups that formed – and Paul finds the perfect solution to their divisions.

“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.”

Paul's image of the church being a body with many parts was a radical statement. In that society the attitude was that those low on the status ladder should remain there and be grateful for the guidance and protection of their natural superiors. All the institutions – military, political, even social – had a natural hierarchy, which Paul proceeded to turn upside down.

Rather than a hierarchy of greatest to least, Paul emphasizes the diversity and interdependence of individuals within the community. For Paul, it is more than tolerating one another. The church is the place in which everyone is recognized as having the same value. As it was for Jesus, being led by the Spirit, all of his followers drink of that same Spirit. From the person who sweeps the steps to the one who teaches to the one who sings, all are necessary AND valued.

Corinth wasn't alone. The church in all ages is made up of people from all backgrounds. "We all hold our various views on a variety of issues. We have different outlooks, different hopes and aspirations, different joys and different sorrows. Viewed from one perspective, these differences could be seen as a recipe for disaster; but from another perspective, [that as being part of the body of Christ] these are the very things which help us to function as a unit and to flourish as a whole. (Rev Andrew Donald, Minister of Pathhead Parish Church, Kirkcaldy)

As the body of Christ we need to ask: "Who needs attention and compassion?" Imagine the feet of the body - hard working, yet happy to work behind the scenes. Then imagine the mouth, or nose or eyes – they are much more noticeable – extroverted you might say. The feet would not be jealous of the mouth, having to be out front (reading scripture in worship for example!) We all work together to be the church who serves God through serving one another, within and beyond our doors.

Arun Ghandi, the grandson of Mahatma Ghandi, is quoted in Life Positive Magazine saying, "Perhaps the most onerous of all tasks at the ashram was cleaning of bucket toilets, used by everyone. Gandhi had deliberately not permitted toilets in private homes. Everyone had to use the row of public toilets at one end of the ashram. Gandhi's reasoning was that cleaning public toilets was the contentious issue on which the caste oppression was based. Millions in India are labeled "untouchables" because of their work. Only low castes do lowly jobs such as street cleaning, garbage disposal and cleaning of public toilets. Because the jobs are menial, the pay is negligible, forcing the low caste to live in abject poverty and ignorance. Everyone, without exception, was required to participate in cleaning the toilets. The first time I was assigned this duty, I found it revolting. But, when everyone, including grandfather, was doing it whom could you complain to?"

I imagine no one was jealous of the individuals on the days they had latrine duty!

I was born with a dislocated hip. It wasn't discovered until it became time for me to try to walk. At a routine checkup the pediatrician must have noticed something. So at the age of one, I was in a full lower body cast. As time went on the cast was made shorter and looked more like a stiff pair of shorts. My mother told me that most people she met would say, "Oh, the poor thing." The reality was that I didn't know any better. My mom was the poor thing having to lug around a squirming child in a 10-pound cast! That dislocation has had lasting repercussions.

Sometimes the hip gets really stiff and I limp a little. When I do yoga, my left side is nowhere near as flexible as my right side. It can be frustrating. I would find myself mentally cursing the leg or the hip because it wouldn't move like the other side. Then the yoga teacher said that was a real eye-opener. It also happens to fit perfectly with what Paul's radical idea that all parts of the body require equal treatment. She said we are naturally more flexible on one side or the other. "Be gentle with the parts that do not move as well. They need coaxing and support."

Isn't that true of all of us here in the church? When we are asked to stretch a bit, try to be flexible, sometimes we have a hard time getting to the same place as others. We need to be gentle with each other. A little encouragement goes a long way.

I've heard folks tell of past experiences here when people weren't allowed to do certain things or some attitudes just weren't accepted. We are not alone in that experience. How we approach it makes all the difference. There was a time when women could not serve as deacons. Then a bit of change came in and women could be deaconesses but only had particular roles. Now we have a Board of Deacons balanced evenly of women and men. Time, flexibility, and encouragement were needed to get to this point.

With openness to the diversity of this body, relying on our need for one another and God, we will find we can bend with the times. There have been changes over the years and only God knows what changes may lie ahead. We'll have sore muscles and growing pains in this body. They will only make us stronger. Paul's advice is to be patient, to encourage one another, and to drink of God's Spirit to get us through. And all the while, we need to continue to ask ourselves, "Who needs attention and compassion?" Sometimes it may turn out to be you.

Arun Gandhi, born in 1934 in South Africa, is Mahatma Gandhi's grandson, who runs the US-based M.K. Gandhi Institute of Nonviolence with his wife Sunanda. This institute works to promote the principles of nonviolence through research, education and programming.