

“Let us Learn from One Another”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant 1/27/19

I Corinthians 12:12-27

“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

¹⁵Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” ²²On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, ²⁴while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, ²⁵so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”

I came across this wonderful little children’s book at Church of the Saviour’s coffee house in DC, The Potter’s House, when we visited there just over a year ago. The title caught my attention: “A is for Activist.” It looks a lot a typical little kid’s book, but its content far from what you’d normally see in such a book. I will read the first three pages for you. “A is for Activist. Advocate. Abolitionist. Ally. Actively Answering A call to Action. Are you an Activist?” [turn page]. “B is for Banner, Bobbing in the Sky. Billowing in the Breeze, ‘cuz you’re not shy!” [turn page]. “C is for Co-op. Cooperating Cultures. Creative Counter to Corporate vultures. Oh, and Cats. Can you find the Cats?”

Now I don’t know if you can see the cats in the picture or not, but I hope you can see that the majority of the page is filled with bees flying and ants working together each carrying a load of something. As you know Rabbi John Nimon and I spend a lot of time together and enjoy conversation, especially about early-20th-century European philosophers and psychologists—especially the Jewish ones. We discuss Martin Buber, Victor Frankl, and especially Emmanuel Levinas. I introduced a new one about a week ago: Lev Vygotsky. Anyone who has a background in childhood education knows him, alongside such greats like Dewey and Piaget. But Rabbi John didn’t know him, and immediately asks me, “Was he

Jewish?” I explained to my dear friend about Lev Vygotsky, excited that I finally knew something that perhaps Rabbi John didn’t. I shared that Vygotsky introduced the idea of cooperative learning, that our greatest and most long-lasting learning takes place when working in some capacity with others. This directly combats Levinas’ concern when we think less of “others” who are different than we are. Instead of being afraid of people who are different, Vygotsky says we are to embrace them as what he terms to be a “knowledgeable other.” My dad always said, “There is absolutely no one that I can learn something from.” I tend to agree. All have had experiences different from my own. All others have had a different set of life circumstances, learning moments, and uniquely shaped experiences that do not imitate my own. And that difference can be an asset for us “if” we are seeking to grow in our understanding of this world and those who inhabit it. Like this children’s book highlights, “C is for Co-op. Cooperating Cultures.”

We do not operate in a monolithic culture. Each of us has formed a culture unique to ourselves, expectations unique to us. Each of us is unique. Cooperation is paramount for affirming that uniqueness and each of us learning from it, even growing as a result of it. How many of us crave to grow, intellectually, spiritually, emotionally? Most of us if not all of us. We desire to develop into being a greater version of ourselves and that comes in cooperation with one another. While the argument is often made that all you need is God, and God alone. God works through us. Like the Apostle Paul said, we are one body with many parts. Each part unique. Each part with its own function. But all are part of the same body. One body in Christ.

Lev Vygotsky died at the young age of only 38, as a social psychologist working in Moscow. He was unable to complete his work on the learning model he had just started to explore, tracking human intellectual development through what has been called the Zone of Proximal Development. It’s this idea that at the edge of our understanding, teetering on the line of what we do know and what we clearly do not know, we learn the most the quickest. This area on the edge is where we learn best, according to the Vygotskians, but it is only while in the presence of a cooperating more knowledgeable other. Someone who knows just a bit more about whatever subject matter is being pursued. Vygotsky argued that simply being in the presence, cooperating with the knowledgeable other, will result in organic learning. Nothing didactic, nothing forced. Simply by being with one another, experiencing life as it naturally occurs, and cooperating together—we learn from one another automatically. Simply put, we rub off on one another. Isn’t that an exciting idea? Maybe I’m not an electrical engineer, but simply by being around one, engaging in conversation and maybe even problem solving together, I learn about electrical engineering. Perhaps I am not the most well versed in the power of silence and meditation, but by being around someone who is, following their example, I naturally learn the ropes. Maybe I’m not an advocate for justice but I love being around those who are, and discover how I too can speak up for those who are not able to speak up for themselves. Paul wrote that we are different parts of the same body. None are the same, all are different, but most significantly all are equally important. And what Paul didn’t mention, but Lev Vygotsky did, is that we can learn from one another. In fact, I would be so bold as to say we “must” learn from one another. Each of us brings something unique to the table and we must be willing to share our call, our gifts, our expertise with one another or at the very least in concert with one another.

Often times we are our own obstacle to progress, whether in our personal development or even our community development. Our friend Bert Fisher introduced me to a wonderful book by Quaker minister, Phillip Gulley, called “If the Church were Christian.” In it he writes in the chapter titled, “If the Church

were Christian, Affirming Our Potential Would Be More Important Than Condemning our Brokenness” that it starts with relatively simple questions: “Could Jesus’s spirit of generosity be replicated in our churches? Could our churches become communities where belief in human transformation and potential come naturally and instinctively? While our churches would not be blind to human brokenness and failings, neither would we believe such failure to be the whole measure of one’s life. In the gospel of Luke, a parable is told about two men who went to the temple to pray. The first man, a religious leader, thanked God he was not like his fellow prayer, a known cheat. But the other man envisioned a larger life for himself and asked for mercy and a fresh start. For too long the church has prayed like the first man, seeing only sin in others and being blind to their promise. The church true to the spirit of Jesus is the church that can see beyond human sin, speak to our deep hunger for mercy and redemption, and give us a vision for all the glory and goodness we could be.” And I would simply add, “for the goodness we could be” TOGETHER!

Some of you are the hands of the body. Some of you are the feet. Some of you are the head, the cerebral center, and others of you are heart. And we must stop thinking that we must convert each other into being our specific part of the body, or that one part is better than the other, or even more righteous than another. That wouldn’t make sense. If we are all hands, how will we walk? We need feet! If we are all feet, how can we get anything done, let alone pick people up because we lack hands and arms. And how can we do anything without the head and heart of the operation? Now, let us affirm the giftings each of us has. Let us help each other grow inward and outward, and learn from one another along the way. There is so much within this small community of faith, and we must love, respect, and affirm each other according to the experiences and gifts we each contain. And we must remember, we all have them. All of us. No exceptions. Oh, and by the way, “Yes, Rabbi John, Lev Vygotsky was Jewish.”

Shalom