

Reconnecting the Grace-full Body: Orchestral Tuning

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

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Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many. ¹³ We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Certainly the body isn't one part but many. ¹⁵ If the foot says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not a hand," does that mean it's not part of the body? ¹⁶ If the ear says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not an eye," does that mean it's not part of the body? ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, what would happen to the hearing? And if the whole body were an ear, what would happen to the sense of smell? ¹⁸ But as it is, God has placed each one of the parts in the body just like he wanted. ¹⁹ If all were one and the same body part, what would happen to the body? ²⁰ But as it is, there are many parts but one body. ²¹ So the eye can't say to the hand, "I don't need you," or in turn, the head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you." ²² Instead, the parts of the body that people think are the weakest are the most necessary. ²³ The parts of the body that we think are less honorable are the ones we honor the most. The private parts of our body that aren't presentable are the ones that are given the most dignity. ²⁴ The parts of our body that are presentable don't need this. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the part with less honor ²⁵ so that there won't be division in the body and so the parts might have mutual concern for each other. ²⁶ If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it. ²⁷ You are the body of Christ and parts of each other. ²⁸ In the church, God has appointed first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, the ability to help others, leadership skills, different kinds of tongues. ²⁹ All aren't apostles, are they? All aren't prophets, are they? All aren't teachers, are they? All don't perform miracles, do they? ³⁰ All don't have gifts of healing, do they? All don't speak in different tongues, do they? All don't interpret, do they? ³¹ Use your ambition to try to get the greater gifts. And I'm going to show you an even better way. (CEB)

I don't remember the first time I went to hear an orchestra. I must have been quite young; I'm fortunate enough to have grown up in a family that highly prized music and live performances, so I was often taken along to the concerts of the Indianapolis Symphonic Choir or the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra or Symphony on the Prairie at the re-enactment center Connor Prairie. What I do remember is pretty instantly falling in love with the sound of an orchestra tuning.

In an orchestra, either the first violinist or the first oboe will play an A so that everyone else can match it—A because every string instrument has an A string they can tune, a beginning space from which to tune all the other strings or tweak the flute piece or whatever it is that needs altering. The sound of all the disparate instruments—horns, violins, flutes, big-bellied-basses and serpentine saxophones and cheerful clarinets—sliding over flats and sharps into a unison pitch is so marvelous to me, even though it's sometimes a bit of a mess. Maybe because it's sometimes a bit of a mess; I can relate.

I love it partly because it is a fragile thing; the unison A only lasts for a heartbeat, a breath before everyone wanders off into the Es and Ds and little trills of making sure everything else is

in tune with that A, that one note before the piece itself begins and all the parts splinter off in their layered harmonies and deliberate rests. I think I also love it partly because every single instrument—well, except percussion—has to join. The orchestra cannot move forward if it isn't in tune; the rest of the concert is second to that moment of making sure everyone is on the same literal and metaphorical page.

There are so many metaphors of difference within a collective unit, we are discovering. Last week, Nancy talked about the threads of weaving and the pattern that comes from layering weft onto warp; this week, we have the concert A that becomes every note on the staff in all sorts of rhythms; over the next couple of months, we will be going through a series on this grace-filled Body made of many parts. Each is an attempt to talk about shared purpose and purposeful direction, about the ways in which we are thread or oboes or elbows but more so we are so deeply human. Each comes back to the insistence that difference and disunity are not the same thing, but also that not being the same is different from not having the same direction, and that distinction matters.

“You are the body of Christ and parts of each other,” writes Paul to the church in Corinth, a church that had many gifted people and many different ideas on what to do with that. This letter begins with an admonishment on the rising mess of people within the community deciding that different gifts necessitate different leaders; “I am of Paul,” says one, but “I am of Apollos,” says another, and “I am of Cephas,” says a third.¹ Each wants to go the direction of their chosen leader, using their particular gifts, and the community—the orchestra—winds up with eight different symphonies, none of which are truly complete.

After Paul sketches out this problem, he spends eleven chapters coming up with metaphors of how to deal with it before arriving at perhaps his most famous one here in chapter twelve: a body. (Perhaps he didn't have an orchestra handy to reference.) “Certainly, the body isn't one part but many,” he says, and talks about hands and feet and ears and eyes. He also talks about apostles and prophets and teachers and healers. None of them can do what the others can do; none of them are *supposed* to do what the others can do. In a literal sense, the human foot has 26 bones and 33 joints; a tongue has neither and is purely a muscle. They are not, cannot be interchangeable, *and that's the point*. Paul is reassuring this community going in all sorts of directions that they don't have to be the same to have the same vision, to follow the same God; no single one of them has to do all the work of Jesus' kingdom, because no single one of them can.

Professor Brian Peterson writes that, “Since the church is intended to be a foretaste of the final reconciliation of all things that God promises, Paul calls the church to start acting that way. Thus, diversity within the church is not a problem to be avoided, solved, or managed, but a gift of God's grace and a sign of the Spirit at work. The differing gifts of the Spirit form us in such a way that we do, and indeed must, belong to one another.”²

It may seem like something we have on lock here at First UMC of Ann Arbor, that appreciation of different gifts, of diversity. Good for us, if so, but Paul's metaphor of the body or mine of the orchestra doesn't mean much if they're only about permission to be different. A foot and an eye and a hand are great, but it's super gross if they're just parts lying around disconnected

¹ 1 Cor. 1:12

² [Commentary on 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2016.

from each other. A violin and a trumpet and a marimba are lovely, but anyone who's ever gone near a high school band room knows that they are painful chaos if they're all playing different things.

Here's the thing: we, at First UMC of Ann Arbor, are a pretty delightful collection of parts. We have some amazing cellos and top-notch timpani and several great guitars, but we aren't always sure about starting with that tuning A. We have some strong hands and dedicated feet and beautiful kneecaps, but we aren't always aware of what step the legs are taking so that the torso can go with.

Understandably, there have been a couple of big things happening in the last few years that have made a lot of noise. It's hard to hear that tuning A when there are so many concertos blasting through the world's speakers; it's hard to see the Body's outline when everything is covered in neon. But we will not get anywhere if we are all following different leaders, all playing our own songs, all trying to tell the Body what is most important. So, over the next several weeks, we're going to talk about who *is* listening for that A and how we can come together to play. We're going to be very concrete in what a shoulder can do, or with whom a harpist can find a place, because an orchestra has to be in tune and a Body has to have a direction but both of them also need various pieces.

When people talk about "I belong to a church," quite often they mean "I have a church which I attend." For a season, that's fine; sometimes life has so much else going on that we can't do more than show up sometimes, listening to the orchestra but never having the time or energy to attend rehearsals. But sometimes, we don't get deeper because we're unsure, or we don't know enough, or we feel there's no place for us. It becomes a little like my continuing attempts to learn to play the guitar; I'm terrible at it because I try and am terrible at it and then feel badly about being terrible at it and so leave it to gather dust in the guest room because I don't like being terrible at things.

Here's a secret, right from the mouth of someone who professionally does church: you can't be terrible at this. You can be wildly unhelpful, sometimes, but you can't be terrible at it because the Church is nothing more or less than a gathering of the God-given gifts within each of us to be love in a hurting world. My gifts are not enough. They're pretty good gifts, and I'm not downplaying that, but they're not enough; I need you to bring yours, and the person next to you to bring theirs, and the person watching online to bring theirs. I cannot play a symphony with only a flute; I can only play a flute solo. And while there's a time and a place for flute solos, the Church—the Body—this strange and marvelous collection of people following a Christ Who transcends metaphors needs all the parts, together, playing in harmony, truly meaning it when we say, "Thy kingdom come, and Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

So how does that work? What does it mean to be an orchestra, a Body, a Church together? It means finding the spot that only you and your gifts and your story can occupy. As we go through this series, we'll look at some of the places that might be, and we begin this week with music because our worship begins with music. Whether it's Sam's gathering songs at Green Wood or the organ's chimes or the centering choral song downtown, the way we do worship is anchored in the idea that we are called to sing to the Lord a new song, that the mountains sing praise, and we will, too. So maybe your gift is in the realm of music. Can you sing, or do you want to try, or do you have a secret passion for the bassoon? There are folks who can help you

connect in, can play that concert A to which you tune your ministry. Paul plays the organ and piano downtown and accompanies the children and youth choirs; Bryan leads the chancel choir and helps plan musical events; Sam sings and plays piano at Green Wood; Carole conducts the bells and makes sure both the instruments and the players are cared for; Napoleon teaches kids how to sing and helps them become a group together. Those are the staff folks to know, if you're a musician, if that's the gift you have to offer the orchestra, the Body; you can email them or call them or awkwardly wait to the side while gathering the nerve to say hello if you're here in person. We'll talk more about other staff who can do other things in the upcoming weeks in case that's not your gift, because again, you have one. I promise you do. Paul promises you do; "you are the body of Christ and parts of each other," he says to the Corinthians who are so sure they're disconnected. "All the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many," he says to us as we listen for that beginning, unifying note of starting again together.

Where is God beckoning you to thrive, to sing, to play, to learn, to love, to live into this strange and wondrous mess of metaphors that is living in community, that is worshipful life together? What are the gifts that you bring, the sound of your tuning A that breathes into the entire, complex song we sing? Think about it, if you don't already know; ask us if you aren't sure where to start. We'll keep talking about it, and listening to each other, and doing the work of being a community together, knowing that each one brings something to make the entirety that much richer, that much stronger, that much more exciting, just like that opening layer of everyone breathing into one note and then dancing into something entirely new.

May we, together, have the openness to receive the gifts given us, the courage to use them, and the faith to let the Body be so much bigger than our own understanding. Amen.