

Who We Center

1 Cor. 12:14-26

¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The 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.” ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and 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; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Live in any community long enough and there is bound to be an issue or two—including the church. There may be personality conflicts or power struggles. There may be clashes over theology or interpretative lenses. We may not share the same political ideology or basic understanding of what church is about. Like any relationship we bring with us our old suitcases full of past experiences and expectations, full our preferences and ways of doing things “right.” And when we add it all together, things don’t always line up in sweet five-part harmonies.

You see, when we infuse our lives together we are creating a new culture and often it is a hot mess. St. Paul is addressing the hot mess in a multicultural, multi socioeconomic church full of Jews and Gentiles, of both privileged and underprivileged members. All coming together to form a new culture and identity in Christ. And it is anything but easy.

Well, we know it’s true. We know it isn’t easy. Perhaps the issue is that the dominant culture sets the tone for all of us. And often it’s at the expense of minority groups who do not fit in with the dominant culture’s experience. Or perhaps the issue is that even the church doesn’t do multicultural very well. How do we celebrate other cultures without appropriating? How do we create a place where all feel safe and at home at the same time? My mother-in-law pastors a multicultural church in downtown Detroit. They had to go to two services to keep everyone under the same roof—one has a service with gospel music, the other a traditional service with hymns. But guess which one has the 8 a.m. time slot, and which has the 11 a.m. We live in a white, hetero-normative, cis-gender, able-bodied, masculine dominated world. And whoever fits within these categories is granted dominant culture’s privileges. We know this.

So notice how it lines up with St. Paul’s advice. He tells the congregation that those whose gifts are sidelined by society, that they are the ones we are to bring to the center in the church. He says that we who carry privilege do not have the same layers of needs as those without it. It’s why a

white church proclaiming Black Lives Matters is important, and why we must honor Black History and need to teach Black history in our schools. It's also why politicians are attempting to silence Black history as a way of controlling the dominant cultural narrative. It's why coming out as an affirming congregation is a no brainer. We center those who society sidelines because, at least St. Paul says, in Christ the system has been rearranged and we are now to be on the side of the underprivileged, the underserved, the underdog.

Today is Superbowl Sunday, in case you forgot. The L.A. Rams vs. the Cincinnati Bengals. The Rams are the favorite. They have the experienced quarterback. They happen to be playing at their home field. Meanwhile, the Bengals have never won a title in franchise history. Who are we inclined to root for? The underdog! We have a soft spot—a compassion—for a Cinderella story.

But here's the thing: To root for the underdog is easy when our team isn't involved. But how would we feel if it was our team playing the underdog? And this gets at the tension. St. Paul's point is when we look out for me, myself, and mine we no longer follow the God who centers those who are underserved, underprivileged, and underdogs.

Naturally, we get a sense of the problem. If we center someone else, what happens to me? Or to my kids? Or to my team? Or to my people? Or to my history? And here's the genius of St. Paul's council. While he says we are to center those on the margins, he also tells those on the margins that they are not to center themselves either. Otherwise, what is to keep them from marginalizing and maligning someone else? The gifts given by the Holy Spirit are not about serving our own needs, they are about serving and empowering others. Why? Because that is what love does.

Perhaps you remember the name John Forbes Nash. He was the mathematician who the movie *A Beautiful Mind* was made after. John Nash, who was from Bluefield, West Virginia, won a Nobel Prize in 1994 for his mathematical contributions to game theory. He solved mathematical equations which proved predictable outcomes based on two competitors playing a game. He said that when we are playing based on the rivalry of our own self-interest—whether politics or sports or resources—then what we will end up getting is the best of the worst. When I look out for myself, and you look out for yourself we end up settling for mediocrity. But when we look out for the interest of one another—when I look out for your best interest and you look out for mine—what Nash proved mathematically, is we then get the best of the best. If you happen to be in an involved relationship, try this out and see how it goes.

It is an equation which proves that compassion works; empathy works; God's kingdom works.

We can practice this now. We can suffer with those who suffer, regardless of what side of town they live on. We can rejoice with those who rejoice, regardless of who they voted for. We can continue to use our privileges and advantages to center those who do not have it. And if the math adds up correctly, we will then discover ourselves in the center of God's kingdom. The best of the best. And is that not what everyone deserves?