

The Rev. Jessie Gutsell Dodson  
St. Paul's Episcopal Church; Annual Meeting Sunday  
Epiphany 3; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Year C

### **We are the Body of Christ**

On October 12 I sat on the second floor of this building surrounded by a table of my church colleagues for our staff meeting.

Each week a different person leads a prayer or reflection,

And that week John (my fellow priest) led us in a brief guided meditation.

In between the silences and deep breaths, John invited us to be present to our physical bodies in the space.

This was quite an ask for a 39-week pregnant body.

“Be present to my body?” I wanted to respond back to him with exasperation.

My body that could hardly walk upstairs anymore?

My body that had been going in and out of labor for weeks?

My body that had swelled beyond the capacity of clothes or any hope of a good night's sleep.

But I surrendered to the moment,

joining with my colleagues as we sat in a guided stillness for 5 minutes at most, scanning our bodies and practicing a brief and holy awareness of them.

As we stood up to leave the meeting an hour or so later, I felt a shift in my body.

Within a few minutes I realized my water had broken,

And the work of labor was beginning...for real that time.

It's been about 14 weeks since that staff meeting,

And in those weeks, I've spent nearly every waking and sleeping moment beside a newborn baby.

There's something about birth and newborn days that radically reorients you to the primacy of the body.

Literally the only thing a newborn needs is the care of his body...

Meals every couple of hours,

Many hours of sleep,

Cuddles to assure his safety.

There are studies that show that physical touch and love impacts the ways that a baby's brain develops.

Those who don't receive enough caring touch are found to be at a higher risk for emotional, behavioral, and social problems when they grow up.<sup>1</sup>

This has been the fullness of my existence over the past three months:

Nurturing a squirming, helpless newborn baby,

Holding him, rocking him, feeding him, and singing to him.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/infant-touch/#:~:text=Many%20children%20who%20have%20not,brain%20undergoes%20during%20that%20period.>

There are no long conversations, no questions of the future or regret over the past.  
Just this one thing: A body to receive care.

When I came back to work two weeks ago, I was immediately reminded of the primacy of bodies here too.

Within a day of my return, I was called to keep vigil with a family who had just lost their father.  
I gathered with them as we huddled over the body of their dad,  
Laying our hands on him,  
Praying for him,  
Anointing him with holy oil.

On my first Sunday back, we doused toddlers in water as we baptized them,  
Smudging their heads with Chrism oil,  
Praying for their hearts to be “inquiring and discerning” as they begin their journeys of faith.

Tomorrow, our rector Jeanne will leave for two weeks to sit beside our beloved member Jackie Aho, who’s receiving cancer treatment in Turkey.  
Jeanne will offer emotional care and physical support.

We’re all about bodies here:

Birthing them,  
Baptizing them,  
Holding them through illness and pain,  
Praying them home at the time of death.

As Christians, we believe the body matters.

And in our Epistle reading today, which was an excerpt of a letter St. Paul wrote to the congregation in Corinth, we hear even more about bodies.

“You are the body of Christ,” he tells them.

When God made you, he made you each differently.

“If all were a single member, where would the body be?” Paul asked.

We each represent a different part of the Body of Christ,  
Imbued with a different set of gifts and abilities.

I remember I once used this as an ice-breaker question at a church event.

“What part of the Body of Christ are you?” I asked.

People’s eyes widened as I asked the question.

Some giggled.

But within a few moments, people started to share,

And I was blown away by the thoughtfulness of the answers.

“I’m the eyelashes of Christ,” one participant said,

“To catch the tears that fall.”

Whoa.

“I’m the arm muscles of Christ,” one outreach coordinator said,  
 “Who helps keep Christ’s hands strong to serve in the world.”

One by one we went around the room,  
 Calling to mind the body parts of Jesus,  
 Finding ourselves in the story of His ministry in this world.

It brings to mind the famous quote by St. Teresa of Avila, who once so poignantly said:  
 “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet but yours.”<sup>2</sup>

We exist as a church now to serve as Christ taught us:  
 To, as the Gospel of Luke echoes for us today from the words of the prophet Isaiah,  
 “Bring good news to the poor,  
 To proclaim release to the captives,  
 To let the oppressed go free.”

Each of us, no matter if we’re the hands that serve, the minds that calculate and think, the eyes  
 that weep, or the throat that sings...  
 “Each of us is equally necessary for the full flourishing of this body.”<sup>3</sup>

When we conclude this combined service, we’ll go directly into our Annual Meeting.  
 This is our yearly opportunity to assess our own health as a collective Body of Christ.  
 But before we begin that important communal work, we’ll celebrate the Eucharist.  
 By doing this, we take part in our regular reminder of the sacredness of the Body in our tradition.  
 Christ’s body, once a squirming, needy newborn baby,  
 Is now the body offered to us for our nourishment, healing, and unity.

You’ll carry your own body forward to receive communion,  
 And as you return to your seats, I invite you to center yourself in your own body.  
 Scanning it, bringing awareness to it.  
 This body that God made for you in your mother’s womb.  
 Where does it hurt?  
 Where has it healed?  
 This body, your body.  
 What can it offer?  
 What part of the Body of Christ are you?  
 And for what purposes has God made you in all your uniqueness and frailty and potential?

These are the questions we hold as we recall the words of our patron Saint Paul:  
 You, my friends, “are the body of Christ,  
 And individually members of it” (1 Cor 12:27.)

We need each one of us to make this body function.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://catholic-link.org/quotes/st-teresa-of-avila-quote-christ-has-no-body-but-yours/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-1-corinthians-1212-31a-5>

“If one suffers, all suffer together with it.  
If one member is honored, all rejoice together.” (1 Cor 12:26)  
Each member here, each member watching online,  
Each member going about his or her business today...  
We’re indispensable to each other (1 Cor. 12:22.)  
We are the Body of Christ.

May we believe in our minds,  
May we sense it our hearts,  
And may we feel it all the way down to our bones.

Amen.