Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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SECOND SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY

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*“This Is My Body”* 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Most of us are aware of how often Paul is accused of being quite strict in his teaching. The passage we just heard is one of the teachings that causes him to have such a reputation. Yet, Paul was addressing a very important issue for the members of the church in Corinth. He was calling on them to confront the way in which our bodies are an important part of our faith, and our expression of faithfulness. In his instruction, Paul is asking the Corinthians to consider how they are using their bodies, and how this usage is connected to our lives as people of the Way—that is Christ’s Way.

From the reports Paul had received of them, the Corinthians had lost their understanding of the connection between the body, the mind, and the spirit. They had begun to believe that they could do anything they wanted with their bodies, indulge any whim, and every appetite.

Their salvation, they said, had freed them of all older constraints in the Law. As Paul offers here in his letter, some Corinthians had begun to say “all things are lawful for me.” This quotation actually became a slogan that had become a popular defense for excessive behavior. Indeed, it was the common response to any criticism they might have received, any attempt to curtail immoderate consumption of food or sex.

However, when the Corinthians argued, “all things are lawful,” Paul countered with the notion that just because something *can* be done does not mean that it *ought* to be done. Not all the things we can do with our bodies are beneficial to ourselves, nor for the body of Christ.

And so, Paul also points out how easily some people can become enslaved by their appetites and the immediate gratification of them. He notes that those who consider “all things lawful” may soon find themselves dominated by the pursuit of pleasure. And when we are dominated by our appetites—or any other thing or pursuit—then God has been displaced in our lives. We have made that new thing, or person, or activity our new god and we are no longer free.

And for those who argue that just as the stomach was designed, presumably by God, to enjoy food, so is sexual pleasure a natural gift simply to be enjoyed. Paul counters that even this simple truth *is under God’s authority*.

So, Paul does not deny that sexuality or food are gifts from God. Paul does not label either as evil. But he does make clear in this statement, “God will destroy both one and the other,” that it is God also who has the authority to destroy both the gift and the person who possesses it if that gift is not used in accordance with divine will.

As with all things, there is a context to this new-found freedom the Corinthians, and all believers in Christ have, and have been given to enjoy. Their context is their relationship with Christ. Once we become Christians, argues Paul, we become members of the body of Christ. To participate in something like prostitution or other sexual violations, then, involves Christ in those actions because we—our hearts, our minds, our spirits, *and our bodies*—now make up Christ’s own body.

Our bodies are an essential, even a vital part of the greater body of Christ in the world. We are not our own, *but are a part* of something greater. God naturally has expectations for how we use our earthly bodies while in this life. Our bodies are meant to be used in ways that please God, that glorify God, that build up the body of Christ.

Although Paul was, in this part of the letter to the Corinthians, focused on the gluttony and the sexual wantonness that had been reported to him, his words have meaning that reaches far beyond these particular concerns. What Paul lays bare to us is the way in which our bodies not only belong to Christ but are also a private and a public declaration of our relationship with Christ.

When I had originally decided to preach on this passage, I wanted to talk about the time-honored practice of pilgrimage—that was to be my context.

Today, we tend to think of pilgrimage as a walking meditation, or a tour to a place of great beauty and sacredness—a way to immerse ourselves in the sights and sounds of many other people of faith before us. It is also a way to remove ourselves from the regular trappings of our lives and take some time to go on a journey with God.

However, in the past, many Christians went on a pilgrimage as an act of repentance. It was a physical way of addressing personal sin.

The belief was that we do not sin only in thought and mind. We sin with our whole being—with the sum total of who we are. Therefore, it was thought that the whole body should also participate in the confession of sin, and in our expression of regret. This also made it quite public or communal.

Throughout it all, what is lifted-up for special consideration is our bodies—the way we use them, the activities our thoughts and desires impact the world around us *through the use of our bodies*. This calls us to consider the way in which we are joined to Christ, the way in which our bodies’ actions represent the relationship Christ has with us…or the way in which our bodies violate that relationship.

I have been thinking about that a lot this past week as I, and I believe many of us, have thought about the violence that erupted in our nation’s capitol.

I have been asking myself: what exactly has been glorified by this violent, angry riotous mob?

There are those who also point to the protests—and in some places, the riots—that shook us to our core over this past summer. What was accomplished there? How was God glorified in those protests?

Many people see both actions as the same kind of destruction and disregard for life and property. And so, I would like to make this abundantly clear: violence and destruction, looting, arson—all of these things are wrong and should be absolutely condemned by all of us. Those who took part in such violent activities should be prosecuted to the greatest extent the law will allow—even those who were driven by heartbreak, and anger and frustration borne of generational suffering that we know about. That is part of our history.

What I want us to notice and affirm is that each group had a particular foundation on which they based their actions.

One group’s actions were based on the very real issue of racial injustice that has plagued our country for just about all of our history. While we do make progress there are just too many people of color who continue to suffer the effects of this history. And yes—on this particular Sunday, the day before Martin Luther King, Jr. Day—I want to acknowledge and celebrate the progress we have made.

However, I also want to say that we are not done. There is much left to do, and I know this because of the other group we witnessed taking to the streets of Washington, D.C. this past week, exemplified something quite different.

What can we say the same of them? How can we come to grips with the reality that theirs were actions founded on lies, a cult of personality, and a desire to maintain a status quo that includes institutional racism and discrimination? Just take a look at the slogans many of those folks displayed. One of them was the Confederate Flag. Then there was a whole group of them wore T-shirts with the letters: 6MWE—meaning, six million weren’t enough—six million Jews exterminated by Hitler were not enough for some of these people.

In subjecting our bodies to the kind of over indulgence Paul describes in this passage we diminish, even persecute Christ all over again. When we give our minds, hearts, spirits, and bodies over to lies and a desire to destroy others with whom we do not agree, Christ is also dragged into the ugliness of our actions—we proclaim a corruption of who he is and what he stands for—what *we* stand for as his followers.

However, when we give ourselves—and our very bodies—when we give our bodies over to the reclamation of dignity and equality for all people, and *peacefully* march in the streets to bear witness to this, we bring Christ into that activity, too. We glorify him by proclaiming the worth and the beloved nature of *all* people.

Finally, in considering what we do with our bodies to be of importance to God is Paul’s analogy of the body as a temple. Just as the Spirit of God, while incapable of being confined to any earthly place, took up residence in the temple in Jerusalem, so God’s image, and Christ’s Holy Spirit, reside within each *human* body. Just because the human soul will one day leave its earthly body does not make the “temple” that once contained it any less holy. A great price was paid to make this unity between God and humanity a real one. Therefore, my prayer for myself, and for all of us, is that we take this unity seriously and use our bodies only to glorify God. Friends, let us truly *be* the body of Christ. Amen.