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*Body Image*

A sermon on 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, with Psalm 19

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Have you seen those commercials for the DNA testing on ancestry.com? The one where the guy has grown up thinking he had German ancestry, and wore lederhosen, but then he got his DNA tested through ancestry.com and found out he wasn't German at all. He was actually more than 50% Scotch Irish, so he ditched the lederhosen and went out and bought a kilt.

Then there was the one where a gal thought she'd married an Italian man, but after he took the DNA test, he learned he was only a little bit Italian, and a lot Eastern European. And then the commercial with the woman who took the test and discovered, much to her surprise and delight, that she was 25% Native American. She explained, "I wanted to know who I am and where I came from."

Perhaps some of you have had your DNA tested--has anybody in here had their DNA tested through a place like ancestry.com or 23 and Me? It's natural to want to know more about who we are, and what makes us unique. That drive to understand who we are is part of what's behind the countless personality tests and facebook quizzes out there.

There are lots of different ways to identify and categorize ourselves—our ethnic and cultural heritage, our gender, the place we live, the teams we cheer for, the things we do for a living, the music we prefer. All these things are fine—but our primary identity, even deeper than our DNA, is much bigger than that. Paul spells it out in his letter to the Corinthians: we are members of the body of Christ. Before we are Americans, or men and women, or Kansans, or K-State or KU fans, before we are even Dothraki or Ironborn or Starks or Lannisters—that's in

honor of our choir director, whose birthday it is today—we are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.

This has some pretty powerful implications.

First, if we are the body of Christ, and each of us is a member of this body, that means each one of us is incredibly important. YOU are important because you are you, and you are part of this body, and nobody else can be YOU in this body. Nobody else can see things exactly the way you can . . . nobody appreciate things in quite the same way . . . nobody has the exact combination of qualities that you have, nobody has your particular thoughts and feelings and hopes and dreams. And so whether you are a super-involved church member who helps with lots of activities, or you're someone who has had to pull back a little bit because you've had an illness or a death in the family, or you've just got some STUFF you're dealing with, you MATTER. Whether you are one year old or a hundred and one. You MATTER, and we need you.

Second, you need everybody else. You need the people who love this church with all their hearts, who generously give their time, talent, and treasure. You need your buddies in Bible Study and your lunch group and the people who called and sent cards and prayed with you when you were sick.

You also need the person who dominates your Sunday School class or Dinners for Eight group with seemingly no awareness of how their comments come across to the rest of the group. And you need the person who takes way too much food at the church picnic. And the person who asks too many questions and makes a 30 minute meeting go an hour and a half. You need the newcomer who unknowingly sat in the pew that you like to think of as yours. If there is anybody here who really gets on your nerves, and you avoid them if at all possible—you NEED

them. They are in the same body of Christ as the rest of us, and as much as we might like to think otherwise, we cannot do without them.

Now this is true, not only for our particular body of Christ, the First Presbyterian Church of Topeka, but for the whole body of Christ, the church universal. This is where things get interesting. There are other churches out there—Christian churches--that are REALLY, REALLY different than our particular congregation—in fact, they’d be really different from just about any congregation in the Presbyterian Church USA. Some of these churches view baptism differently than we do . . . some churches are more selective about who receives communion than we are . . . some do not ordain women or allow them to serve in leadership roles. And some of these same churches are growing and flourishing and doing incredible, self-giving, risk-taking ministry right here in Topeka.

A couple weeks ago, a group of Evangelical Christian pastors and leaders issued something called the “Nashville Statement,” which is called The Nashville Statement because that’s where they were gathered when they wrote it, not because everyone in Nashville agrees with it. The Nashville Statement not only describes LGBTQ persons as immoral, if they give full expression to who they are, but also condemns anyone who disagrees with this. The Nashville Statement declares that when it comes to matters of homosexuality or gender identity, this is not a matter on which Christians can agree to disagree—rather, anyone who disagrees with the view of sexuality set forth in the Nashville Statement is not a Christian, even if they believe that they are. In other words, you may think you’re a Christian, but if you disagree with the Nashville Statement, the authors insist you are not.

And I bring this up not to get into a discussion about homosexuality or transgender issues—those issues deserve better attention than I can give them this morning—but to point out

how challenging it can be for Christian people to live in unity together when we can't even agree on who is part of the body and who is not. And it is excruciatingly painful when some members see themselves as necessary and vital parts of the body of Christ, while other members of that body say, "You know what? You are not here. God does not include you in the body of Christ." If you are the one being excluded, it stings! It's infuriating. And it would be so easy for those of us who feel stung to stay, "I don't need you anymore."

Except that we do. We still need each other. Even Christians whose ideas or theology or behaviors are so different than ours that those differences shake us to the core—even those Christians have something to teach us. In her book, Disunity in Christ, author Christina Cleveland points out that we need each other because diverse groups are better groups. They're more creative, and they make better decisions. A group where everyone is similar finds it harder to keep learning because each member is bringing less and less unique information to the table.

As Presbyterians, we need our Baptist and Catholic and AME and nondenominational brothers and sisters in Christ. They have gifts and strengths that we do not have. And, they need us. We Christians of the Reformed Tradition bring a distinct flavor to the Christian buffet that would not be there without us. We need to be the best we can be not just for our own sakes, but for the sake of the larger body of Christ.

Within this congregation AND within the larger body of Christ, we need people who are more conservative than us, and people who are more liberal than us. And as a mostly white Presbyterian congregation, it doesn't hurt to remember that white is not the main color of the body of Christ, but that Christ's body includes millions and millions of African and Asian and Central and South American Christians, not to mention all the wonderful diversity that is right

here in the United States and even here in Topeka. Wouldn't it be great if someday, our church reflected this ethnic and cultural diversity a little better . . . it could happen.

Next week, we'll be looking at specific ways to live together in unity as Christians, and how to handle it when the going gets tough, because it always does. Meanwhile, I invite you this week to ponder the great good news that unity is not something we have to work on, or create. Unity is a gift of the Spirit. We are already unified. Our task is to recognize it, and live it out. And to keep living it out.

We can also give thanks that unity does not mean uniformity. You can be exactly who you are, with all your likes and dislikes, and I can be exactly who I am, with all of mine, and we can love one another and learn from one another right here in this one body of Christ. May there be no dissension within the body, and may we all have the same care for one another. Amen.