

## A Message from the Earlobe

**Scriptures:** Isaiah 61:1-4; 10-11, I Corinthians 12:12-26

I'm Kate Wolfe Jenson. I've been attending Trinity Presbyterian since last fall and intend to transfer my membership here from North Como Presbyterian.

I get asked to give one or two sermons a year and I always feel like the Holy Spirit is at work-- this time in some strange and mysterious ways.

I'm afraid I have to start with a couple of apologies.

First, the omissions in the bulletin are my fault. I thought the bulletin Dee e-mailed me was final and printed it with the cover. As you know, it's missing details on special music-- provided today by \_\_\_\_\_ and the sermon title, which is A Message from the Earlobe.

Secondly, I was not here a few weeks ago when Gary preached on the same New Testament scripture. One lesson a person could learn from this is that you should never miss church because there **will** be repercussions. Another possibility is that the Holy Spirit **really** wants you to consider your place in the body of Christ. In my experience, the Holy Spirit is sneaky like that.

Today is Inclusion/Disability Access Sunday. It is a Sunday designated by the PC-USA for congregations to consider how they practice hospitality, particularly how they welcome people with disabilities. I can tell you that Trinity Presbyterian has a reputation around town for sensitivity to issues regarding people with mental illness and mental disorders. I can also tell you that I cannot get through the front door or up to this chancel without help. I know: we're working on it.

Among other things, I'm an artist. The gift in it is that I have a busy imagination. The problem with it is that I have a busy imagination. When Dee asked me to speak today, I thought about a book I've been reading called *Notes on the Need for Beauty*. In it, I read about Donna Henes, an artist working with patients and staff of the Manhattan Psychiatric Hospital. Henes collected clothing, tore it into strips and then knotted the cloth around trees and fences at the hospital. 4159 knots in honor of the 4159 patients and staff. Author J Ruth Gendler notes that Henes "bound together many strands as she considered the nature of healing, vision, suffering, and society's definitions of sanity."

Inspired by this, and thinking about how we might work with ideas of disability and inclusiveness today I felt sure that there would be Bible verses using the metaphor of fabric. We are woven together. Christ helps us untie the knots we make in our lives. Things like that.

I searched my Bible and I didn't find anything. Paul was a tent maker and Priscilla was a seller of fine cloth, but Scripture totally misses the opportunity to use of fabric as metaphor. But I remembered this passage in Corinthians and the metaphor of the body.

We're going to think **both** about the body and the about cloth. I hope each of you chose a strip of cloth when you came into the sanctuary. If you did not receive one, please raise your hand and one of the ushers will bring you some choices. Consider the strip of cloth you're holding. I work for the Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network, which gives me an opportunity to read and learn about the education of small children. One of the ways teachers can help children who deal with autism focus during lessons is to give them a small object to manipulate. Having something to do with their hands helps them focus on other content. So while I'm talking, I invite you to manipulate the piece of cloth you're holding. Tie knots near the ends of it, make marks on it with a pen or pencil, poke holes in it, see if you can get it to fray ... Make it yours. I want you to recognize this strip of cloth if you should see it again. We'll come back to that later...

The metaphor of the body is an inclusive one. It's hard for me to grasp some of the images in the Bible. I've only petted sheep at zoos... I've certainly never been a shepherd. I do have a body and the bodies we live in today are not much different than the bodies of the people in the Bible. We get it.

***We may think: "because I'm not a hand I do not belong to the body."***

Hands are so cool, so useful. We caress with them. We make fists with them. We pick things up with them. We use them when we talk. We pass the peace with them. Hands are quite glamorous. Who wouldn't want to be the hand in the body of Christ?

And then there are less snazzy body parts. Wikipedia says,

The **earlobe** is composed of tough [connective tissues](#), lacking the firmness and elasticity of the rest of the pinna. Since the earlobe does not contain [cartilage](#) it has a large [blood](#) supply and may help to warm the ears and maintain balance. However earlobes are not generally considered to have any major biological function.<sup>[1]</sup>

As an artist and as a person with disability, I sometimes feel like I don't have any major function. I feel like an earlobe.

Anyone whose life circumstances—income, age, disability and so on—put them outside the norm may feel *less than*. If we can't talk about our job, our kids, our house, the dog, etc. it's easy to get the feeling that we don't really belong here.

*We were all baptized into one body*

Paul is telling us we are all members of the body of Christ. When we were baptized, when we chose to follow Jesus Christ, we became part of the body. We are members. We are meant to be included and, it turns out, we are not reliable judges of our own importance or usefulness.

We are one body.

***“The 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.’”***

I've been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis since I was 20 years old. In MS, the insulation on the nerve is damaged until the nerve can no longer carry messages. My first visible symptoms were in my feet and ankles. I had trouble walking. It's one of the ironies of life that often we don't appreciate what we have until it's threatened. When I first started having trouble walking, I was working as a temp at 3M. I would watch people walking through the parking lot (usually down the center of the lane, because that's what 3M employees do) and the movement of their feet was mesmerizing.

*Heel-toe, heel-toe*

*The ankle flexes.*

*The foot arches.*

*The leg swings.*

*Each pace is magic.*

*Each motion leaves a trail of*

*Fairy dust behind...*

*Scribbles of amazement.*

MS is often progressive and I find myself now-- as my hands become more affected-- watching people's hand movements with the same wonder. Every part of our bodies is precious.

*“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’”*

Not only is Paul advising us that we can't judge our *own* usefulness, he's also suggesting that we can't judge the importance or usefulness of each other.

We are one body.

***God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.***

So we aren't good judges of whether we as individuals belong in the body. We aren't good judges of whether other people belong in the body.

You see a theme here? We are not good judges.

God has it sorted; our opinions are not required.

Paul says "the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable." Now why would that be? Why would we need weak people among us? My theory is that God is all about relationship: our relationships with each other, our relationship with God. When I read healing stories in the Bible the happy ending is frequently an invitation to return to community: give her something to eat...Go to the priest and be declared clean...

I have a friend who was in the recent tornado in North Minneapolis. And I really mean in. The tornado picked her up spun her around with a whole bunch of debris and dropped her back down. She has a broken ankle and some scratches. When we visited, she said to me "God made us to be foolish in front of each other." Our bodies—these non-metaphorical ones—frequently break down in embarrassing ways that require us to ask for help from each other.

Happily, seeing each other in dire straits we are moved to compassion. Paul wants "all members to have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

The disability rights community has a wonderful concept: reasonable accommodation. If something about the way my body works means that the "normal" way of doing things is too hard, my employer is asked to make a "reasonable accommodation" to my disability. I love the idea of generalizing this to the way we live together. If something is difficult for someone, the rest of us can work together to make reasonable accommodation so that they can be included in our community.

We can keep watch over how we exclude other people. While I was working with this Scripture, I learned about how easily and thoughtlessly I exclude others. Afraid that my disability will make me irrelevant, I push myself to do too much. Overscheduled, I don't make time for other people's contributions... I move ahead before others are ready. My fear results in self-absorption. Self-absorbed, I miss including others. For me, this Scripture has been a call to trust my relevance to God and slow down to make space for the plans and gifts of others.

Allow me to circle back to the cloth in your hands. We are each a thread in God's tapestry. Like the cloth you are holding, we have different colors and different textures. Some of us are bright and shiny, others are rough and frayed. Together, we are stronger and more beautiful. As you leave the sanctuary today, I would like you to leave your strip of cloth behind in the basket by the door. In the coming weeks, these strips will be combined together into a wall hanging that will remind you that we are many members of one body creating the kingdom of God.

Where people are strong, we can rejoice in that strength and they can share the gifts they've been given with the rest of us. Where we are weak, we can ask for help from each other. We lean on each other. We hold each other up.

If we are hazy on the details about how to do this, Isaiah is a good source of ideas. We are called to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and comfort all who mourn.

If we do those things, if we include each other and care for each other, then we can "greatly rejoice and exult in the Lord." S Thank you.