

This week on Facebook, I asked two questions of folks...ones that kind of served as flip sides to one another. The first was this, tell me something from 2021 that you were proud of. The answers were vast and various:

-All of my children, not just in 2021. Always. (That was my dad which gave me a nice little oomph.)

-My daughter, because of her professional and personal growth.

-Everyone who just went about their day without getting caught up in life.

-That I read more books in a year than ever. (That was my sister and I was also super proud of her for that.)

-Getting to watch my daughter in her first Nutcracker.

-Continuing to do professional coaching and training and celebrating Christmas with one's family.

-Our granddaughter graduated high school, working, and starting college. (I had several people echo the same thing about their grandkids.)

-Daughter graduated with her masters.

-Proud of my wife for everything she juggles, guiding their children, serving on council, home life, Covid, and taking command of a maintenance squadron.

- Saying yes to an invitation to join church council.
- Proud of Bill and Geoffrey for maintaining and reviving our music program.
- Getting married to my best friend.
- I am not a dumpster fire. I am a multidimensional dumpster Phoenix.
- Teaching music and doing chapel with no singing.
- Helping children get home safely from school.
- Being asked to witness the birth of my nephew.
- Beginning medication for my mental health care.

Conversely, I then asked people what burdens from 2021 were they bringing into 2022 with them and again the answers were vast...

- The uncertainty of the future of my current medical issues.
- Frustration with work advancement and the stress of an older car with high mileage.
- Sometimes feeling like I'm not doing things right.
- Covid restrictions on life, people continuing to die unnecessarily.
- Health concerns and struggles with body image.
- Struggles with self-care and stress reduction.
- Covid, politics in general, women's health issues, teacher shortages, worker issues, all kinds of changes, education debt issues.

I'm always shocked and amazed and the depth of honesty that people are willing to bring to online spaces. People are so willing to comment on the weight of their hearts, on the things their celebrating, and as much as I sometimes have a bleak outlook on social media, I think that things like this tend to be beautiful. What I found even more amazing and awe-inspiring as I watched these feeds grow through the week was the amount of back and forth conversation and commentary that happened. Different people popping in to say that they shared the same joys or burdens. People congratulating others on their accomplishments and asking questions about them. People commenting on their admiration for others and how even from a distance they hold them in prayer. I honestly didn't have to say a word in the midst of the conversations that followed, I simply asked a question and got to sit back and witness the wonders that happened from it.

As I sat there and contemplated the dynamics I was witnessing play out, I started to wonder if at any point Paul had the same sense of awe and admiration when he saw the communities he shepherded walking together, sharing their joys and shouldering their burdens together. If he did, he had to have sat back and thought, ok, at least one of those letters I wrote got through, thank God, thank God that will hopefully make them better together and bring them closer, which is all I really wanted in the first place.

Our second lesson today is one that we have probably heard in various contexts more times than we can count. There was probably a small voice in the back of your head going, “Oh right, this is where Paul rambles about body parts and eyes and feet and many members, blah blah blah.” And ok, that’s fair, because Paul is a smidge bit rambly when it comes to this topic, but I think that his rambling highlights just how absolutely *vital* Paul felt this topic was for the Corinthians. He wanted to make sure that he had covered it backwards, forwards, upside down, and sideways to make sure definitively that they knew what he was saying to them.

I lovingly refer to the Corinthians as Paul’s problem children. No matter how hard he tries, no matter what he does, no matter how many letters he writes, there always seems to be *something* going on with them, something they’re struggling with, something that just haven’t quite gotten right. So he writes and he writes *and he writes* in the desperate hope that things will finally come clear to them. And the thing is, the things that they’re struggling with, they’re real, when you are trying ardently to live in community, as partners with one another despite a myriad of differences, these issues are going to crop up.

So what exactly is the Corinthians problem this time around? Well, in some ways all of the Corinthians issues boil down to one specific problem.

They can't shake the deeply engrained societal belief that some of them are better than others. They have a hardwired *need* to classify each other based on their social standing, on their talents, on their wealth, on their abilities, and to use those to set up some sort of hierarchy within their newly built church community. So, basically, they tell Paul that they're struggling because something about that mentality doesn't seem to be working. Who is supposed to be the best? Who is the most important? How do they organize themselves into some sort of understandable social circle?

If Paul really wanted to be succinct, he could sum up his entire message with one word: DON'T! Don't do that. No hierarchies, no social classifications. Just don't. But instead, he gives them an apt metaphor. Your community is like a body, a body that is made up of vast and various parts that all fit together for the good of the whole. Every single piece is necessary. You need your eyes as much as you need your baby toes. You need your ears as much as you need your head. Every part serves a role, none better than the other. And to top it all off, *God made you that way*. God made you that way as a community so that you can show the same, equal care for one another. If one of them suffers, they all suffer. If one of them rejoices, they all rejoice. They are committed to a deep sense of mutuality in this new thing called the church. It's time to let go of their old

ways of doing things and thinking about things, and realize that from now on, as one of them goes, so they all go, as one body of Christ for good, for bad, for everything in between.

It may sound simple, painstakingly simple really, and yet it is a reminder that we all need, especially at a time when we may feel the bonds of community fraying. Who we have committed to be together as a body of Christ isn't something that we just do for show or just in name only, we do this because we are committed to seeing each other equally and belovedly and in the midst of that it means suffering and rejoicing together. I think far too often we sink into the mentality that whether we are online or in person we operate in church in isolation. We come to this space, we worship, we pray, we sing, and we rarely think about the others that are gathered around us, the burdens they bring to this space, the hopes they bring to it, the joy, the worry. Yet what Paul reminds us of is that those are things we share together. No one is insignificant, no one should be invisible, no one should be ignored; everyone is important, everyone has something to offer, everyone should be seen, everyone should have someone to walk with here in this place, because that is what it means to be the body of Christ.

The key here though is that we can't just *assume* that everyone knows this, that everyone feels this here in this place. Which means that it's up to

us, whether we're a pinky finger, an ankle, an eyebrow, to make sure that everyone around us knows how much they are valued, how much they are appreciated, how much they are a vital part of who we are as the body of Christ. It isn't enough to say, oh yeah, we all know this, we have to truly *live* into it, breathe it into our very existence here, so that there can be no question whatsoever of who we are together and what we mean to one another and how we operate as a community.

So all of those things that I named at the beginning? The joys and the burdens? They don't just belong to the person that named them, spoken into the ether of the internet to be ignored or forgotten. They belong to all of us, for as one struggles so we all struggle, as one rejoices we all rejoice. For kids and grandkids who are resilient and awesome and have accomplished so much. For health concerns and worries and waiting. For saying yes to new opportunities. For stress and strain. For taking care of others safely. For Covid angst. For reading goals. For self-care hopes. All of it, it's ours, together. One body, many members, committed to this thing called church. One body, many members, committed to this journey called faith. Every single one of us has a part to play, something to contribute, and every single one of us has a joy and burden that we want to share or need help holding. This is who we are together, if we so choose to remember. **AMEN!!!**