

Loosing Our Way

His name was Donald, but everyone called him "Squeaky". Unable to talk, the only way he could communicate was by making a high-pitched squeaking sound and pointing for emphasis. He lived during a time when those terrible words "mentally retarded" were used to describe someone with his condition. In fact only recently has the more appropriate and respectful phrase "individuals with intellectual disabilities" become the norm. Donald's appearance didn't help matters. He looked more like a cartoon character than a human being. He had a head of thinning curly hair that sat in circle atop his head, oversized ears, no front teeth and big brown eyes. But it was his skin that you always noticed first because it looked like hardened leather. You wondered if it was that way less because of his age and more because of the stares, the comments, the finger pointing he must have endured over the years.

I got to know Donald when I was 15. My summer job that year was working for the Park and Recreation Department in Tuscaloosa. I kept the scorers book and ran the nightly softball games that took place at a field located on the grounds of Partlow State Hospital. Donald was a patient there. I met Donald my first night there and every night after that he waited for me to show up and wouldn't leave my side until I went home. We were an odd pair to be sure. My parents always bought me supper at McDonalds on the way to the field. Over the summer we developed our own little Eucharistic ritual where we took, blessed and broke. I got the hamburger and fries and Donald always got the cherry pie.

I continued to see Donald in Jr. High and High School because our EYC was always doing something for the patients at Partlow. Donald always recognized me and whenever he saw

me he would begin squeaking and pointing as he made his way over to give me a hug. He never could figure out why I didn't always carry a cherry pie.

One of the last times I ever saw Donald was at a Fraternity party in Tuscaloosa. By now He was living in a group home and had the freedom to move around town and the University campus. It was an afternoon party with a band and beer and everything else that comes with being 20, bulletproof and slightly entitled. I watched from a distance as Donald wandered in the back gate his usual happy go lucky self, just looking to make a connection with someone, anyone. Sadly, there were some there that day that thought having some fun at Donald's expense might be entertaining. First, they tried to give him something to drink and then they began to make fun of him. I could see his facial expression change from one of enjoyment, to disorientation and ultimately fear. I knew instinctively with every fiber of my being what to do. My parents had taught me and my church had reinforced it. I had to stand up for this helpless little man. But instead of instinctively reacting to an injustice, I flinched. I thought about it because I was at one of those junctures in my life when who I was raised to be and who I thought others wanted me to be were at war. And I did nothing. I stood down and I stepped back into the crowd. I became part of the mob. Mercifully, for me and more importantly for Donald, someone did stand up and step out of the crowd. It was a moment, not the first nor the last, when I realized I had lost my way.

The Church in Corinth had lost its way. Corinth was a major commercial center and as a result many of its citizens very wealthy. In Corinth there well defined social divisions. There were basically two classes of people- the privileged and honorable members of society -the politicians, city officials, and the wealthy. And then there was the other class -

the second or lower class citizens who didn't make the cut for the honorable class as a result of their birth family, lack of wealth or education.

When Paul starts a church in Corinth people from both classes were drawn to this new community. Paul makes it clear that this community cannot, it will not reflect the same social structure as the rest of the empire. There will be no designation between rich and poor, slave and free. But like my story a moment ago, human nature being what it is, old habits die hard, and so the richer members of the community continue to act in church just like they acted everywhere else. The reading from Corinthians we heard this morning is Paul's attempt to slam the brakes on this practice. Being in Christian community, he writes, means having a new set of rules and relationships.

To help make his point, Paul takes a familiar metaphor and uses it to teach the church in Corinth how they were to relate to one another. Using the body as a metaphor to describe an organization or social structure was pretty common in the Greco-Roman world. The political theorists in Paul's day spoke of the state or the empire as a single body with the emperor as the head – a clearly defined hierarchy. Some members were more important than others and everyone knew their place, whether it was honorable or dishonorable.

Paul takes that metaphor and changes its meaning significantly. He uses the body metaphor to show how all members are of equal importance. The church is to be a different -- one where everyone is a vital part of the whole; a new community called the church. The body, in other words, is no longer merely the sum of its parts but an integrated whole. Remove one part and the whole is affected. The parts that others might call dishonorable have just as much place and importance as those that get shown off to the rest of the world.

For Paul, membership in the Body of Christ is about relationships of interdependence.

Every member, every person, every gift, every part is needed and everyone is important.

The honorable parts and the hidden parts, the beautiful and even the not so beautiful are all part of the whole and function together. There are no “inferior” parts. “God has so arranged the body, giving greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another” Paul wrote, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all together rejoice”

If we’re honest the truth is that the church of today still struggles much like the church of Paul’s day. Old habits still die hard and Paul’s words, Paul’s challenge is just as relevant today as it was hundreds of years ago. If we call ourselves the church then we commit to be or become that visible body of Christ in the world that Paul spoke of and wrote so beautifully about.

To be that Body means that we’re willing to engage in both the marvelous and the messy parts that come with being members of one body. And, let’s be honest, it can get messy being part of a Body, sometimes even downright painful. But being a member means that we’re willing to deal with the good, the bad, and the ugly because, like it or not, we’re all in this together, individually and collectively called to reflect the image of God to the world and to one another.

One of the things I love about this community, St. Augustine’s, is that you get it. You understand, I believe, what it means to be the body of Christ in the world. The openness, the diversity, the willingness to stand up and step out on behalf of those less fortunate all

speak to that claim. But I also know that having it and keeping it are two different things. Keeping it requires the ability, the willingness to constantly self-evaluate, often choosing discomfort over comfort because human nature being what it is, whether it's Corinth, Nashville or anywhere else we will always have to fight, individually and corporately, becoming complacent, satisfied with where we are and what we've done. To take Paul's metaphor a step further the body needs exercise but also regular check-ups to prevent illness and atrophy. It is that intentional and consistent process of examination that will prevent us from becoming like that Church in Corinth long ago, and losing our way.

My friend Donald died a few years ago. His death, by the world's standards, should have gone relatively unnoticed. But some amazing things happened in Donald's life. The testing became available and it was discovered that Donald was much smarter than people ever assumed. He was embraced by members of the Alabama Athletic department. Local restaurant owners made it clear to their employees that if Donald ever came in they were to give him whatever he wanted. His death was reported in an article in the local newspaper. The words beloved and an institution were used to describe his life.

Donald lives on in my mind. There is the image of his smile, his unconditional love and acceptance of me; but there is also that look of fear on his face that day, an image of helplessness that is seared in my brain and challenges me when other opportunities arise to stand up and step out in support of another member of the body of Christ. Because, that's just it. I failed to recognize Donald as a fellow member of the body. I chose to look at him through the lenses of the world and not through the eyes of the body of Christ, and I missed

it. Donald was just as much a member of the body as I was and he helped me as much or more than I ever helped him.

Shortly we will pray together and share a meal that defines us as the body of Christ. We will then walk out those doors and back into our lives until we come here again to be fed and connected. It is in that in-between time that opportunities will present themselves to be the body of Christ that Paul envisioned. We can choose in those moments to do as I once did, to stand down and step back or we can choose to stand up and step out as the body of Christ in the world.

“Come on people now, smile on your brother, everybody get together, got to love one another”, the Ramblers sang a moment ago. If we are true to Paul’s call to be the body of Christ, it’s not something we do next week, next month or next year. We do it, as the song says, “right now, RIGHT NOW.