

October 30, 2016 (Full Inclusion Sunday)

TEXT: I Corinthians 10:15–21, 31–33

TITLE: Body Problems

By Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Did you know that when you first wake up in the morning you are about a half inch taller than when you went to bed? Lying flat in bed allows the cartilage in your joints and between your vertebrae to relax and reabsorb fluids, stretching you out ever so slightly. So check yourself out in the mirror when you first get up. Enjoy your elongated physique and how tall you are, because by the time you finish your shower and breakfast, gravity takes over—and as I know from experience, everything starts sagging again.

We have a “love-hate” relationship with our bodies. We know we are supposed to take of them—to exercise, to eat healthy foods—and we’re grateful when our bodies get us where we want to go without too many aches and pains. But we are well aware of the many ways bodies can give us problems. Joints wear out. Vision and hearing diminishes. Nerves, blood vessels and organs act up or fail us. To have a body is to have problems.

Body problems are real. But having problems is different from being a problem. When W.E.B. DuBois wrote his classic text *The Souls of Black Folk* back in 1903, he began the book by remarking that between himself and the rest of the world interacting with him as a black man, an unspoken question hung in the air. He said the question is rarely asked for reasons of social delicacy, but it existed nonetheless—a very real question: How does it feel to be a problem? Not to have a problem, but existentially to be a problem. How does it feel?

Bodies can be problems in lots of ways. I was recently in the Byham theater downtown, whose main floor seating doesn’t slope very much. I know full well that when I took my seat in the center of row K, the person behind me did not say to himself, “I am so happy a 6’4” person just sat down in front of me.” Or imagine taking a flight on an airplane when you are a person who is significantly overweight. See how many people avoid eye contact as you seek a seat. It is one thing to have problems; it is another thing to be a problem.

When I was at the anti-racism conference in Montreat, NC recently, one of the speakers was the African American, former MSNBC host Melissa Harris-Perry. She mentioned DuBois’ question and gave a litany of examples asking us to imagine what it means to have your body assumed to be problematic. She asked: How does it feel to know that when you speak the language of your parents, you will be assumed to be here illegally? How does it feel to have the president who looks like you demanded by others to provide proof of his citizenship? How does it feel to publicly wear the symbol of your faith and be assumed to be a terrorist threat to your own nation? How does it feel to know that if you marry the person you love, some will say you are destroying the very fabric

of the nation? How does it feel to fear sending your son to the 7-Eleven for a bag of Skittles on a rainy night?¹

In too many ways, the state and society at large seems to think that certain bodies are a problem—a problem because of their race, gender, sexual identity, their immigration status, disability, criminal record, or lack of residence. Bodies can have problems, it's true—but in too many cases, some bodies are simply seen as problems. And that doesn't feel good. Ever.

One of the other speakers at the anti-racism conference, Dr. Soong-Chan Rah from North Park seminary in Chicago, acknowledged that this can be a hard conversation topic for the church because after we bring up this issue, we want to quickly name a solution for it. He said conversations about race are not like a hospital visit. We don't simply gather to talk about racism and pray, hoping for a quick healing. No, conversations about how American society believes some people are a problem is like a funeral visit, because far too often there is a dead body present in the room with us. That's why we say the litany of names of those who have died over and over again like a rosary: Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin. That's why we name out loud the groups of people who are too often treated as "nobodies" today—those marked as poor, black, brown, immigrant, queer or trans.² Speaking about these things focuses us on people too often identified as "problem bodies" so that we can honestly consider what God would have us do differently—do better—do more faithfully.

Now, take a breath and think about something else with me. The apostle Paul has given us the words we say in church whenever we celebrate communion. He reminds us that when Christ was with his disciples, he took bread, blessed and broke it and said "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (I Cor 11:24). What does the word "this" refer to? Almost all of you would say it refers to the bread—"this is my body." But I would suggest that the "this" refers to the act of blessing, breaking, and sharing the bread.³ This blessing, this breaking, this sharing and entering into fellowship with others—this is Christ's body. And not just back then at the Last Supper. This is Christ's body today.

Is that a problem? It shouldn't be. It is an idea at the very center of what it means to be the church. We are the body of Christ. That's not a metaphor, folks; that's a job description. When DuBois asks his question, "What does it feel like to be a problem?" the answer is "It feels lousy. It feels wrong." That's why our response to so-called "problem bodies" is the body of Christ—a fellowship that feeds one another, knows one another, weeps together, speaks out for justice, comes together to be Christ's body in the world. Remember Paul's words to the Corinthians, when he said *"I speak to you as sensible people...The bread we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body"* (I Cor 10:15-17). Holding a loaf of bread, blessing it,

and reaching out to literally share it with someone else turns us from bodies plural into the collective noun “the body of Christ.”

Now the body of Christ is made up of different ethnicities, nationalities, sexual orientations and gender identities. It includes people who are on file with the criminal justice system, who battle with depression, opioid or heroin abuse, with anxieties that prompt them to insist on the need for concealed carry gun laws. This bread and body isn’t just for NPR listeners, but also for Fox News watchers. This isn’t just for those who on November 8th are “stronger together” but also those who want to “make America great.” There will always be brokenness around the table of Christ. There will always be work that needs to be done even as bread is passed and the cup is shared. Physical therapy needed for imperfect bodies; emotional therapy needed for wounded spirits; confession, repentance and trusting in Christ’s mercy needed for damaged souls. That’s true for each of our bodies and for every body next to us at the communion table of the Lord. We all have problems, but that does not mean we must be a problem.

Twenty years ago, theology professor Brett Webb-Mitchell wrote an article about people with disabilities reminding the church how valuable it is to have children who are differently-abled as a part of their congregation. Differently-abled children evoke the gift of evangelism as they create a caring community around them. Differently-abled children encourage congregations to find alternative ways to express the gospel that would never have been considered without their presence. Differently-abled children help congregations celebrate simple joys, like when the child says “ice cream” in sign language. Differently-abled children teach the value of solidarity as people discover what it means when health care opportunities are unjustly curtailed. Their body is literally part of our body, which together becomes the body of Christ.⁴

Paul said it best: *We who are many are one body*. That is the prophetic word we offer when DuBois’ question is still asked in a divided and hurting world today. It is what needs to be affirmed as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer colleagues live, love, marry, work, and share their gifts in the church and in the world. It is what needs to be proclaimed in the tragic places of violence that leave us weeping over another chalk outline on another American city street. It is what needs to be written on our hearts as we look beyond the horizon of the coming election, look beyond the horizon of our nation’s borders, look beyond the horizon of company profit statements, military spending budgets and cutbacks in famine relief programs and try to see a way forward that is faithful for all God’s children.

William Penn has said, “A horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight.” Perhaps we should consider these questions about problem bodies and the body of Christ first thing in the morning—when we are a centimeter or two taller and can see farther over the horizon ahead. Or perhaps we should always consider these questions while here in church—near to a communion table—seeking to be the

body of Christ. For as the rest of Penn's quote says: "A horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight. So lift us up, strong Son of God, that we may see further." We who are many are one body. AMEN

¹ Melissa Harris-Perry, "How does it feel to be a problem, black America?", Blog post, 7/14/2013.

² Bijan Stephen, review of Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable by Marc Lamont Hill, *NY Times Book Review*, September 4, 2016.

³ Cf. article by Peter Lampe, *Interpretation*, January 1994, p. 43.

⁴ Brett Webb-Mitchell, article in *Theology Today*, July 1995, p. 252.