

"BODY LANGUAGE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
January 25, 1998

INDISPENSABLE, BUT WE ARE ALSO DIFFERENT

Yes, we are indispensable, says Paul....but we are also different.

A nose and a mouth are different. Both are indispensable, but they are different. They have different functions...different gifts to bring to the body. So it is with Christ's body. Some of us are strong at some things; others are strong at others. It would be a mistake to try to be something we are not. That would violate God's plan for our life.

During the last Olympic games, one of the most popular places in the Olympic Village was the bowling alley. Interestingly enough, Olympic athletes weren't that good at bowling. One source reported that in more than a half-hour of viewing, she didn't see one strike bowled. Just because you have strengths in one area, doesn't mean that you have strengths in others.

Basketball fans present will remember how a few years ago Michael Jordan decided he should be a professional baseball player. He put on the right uniform and he used the right equipment and was even assigned to play right field but watching Michael Jordan play baseball was not anything like watching him play basketball. They say that fly balls hit him in the chest. They said that his swing lagged inches behind a fast ball. Number 33 even referred to the umpires as "referees". You'll remember that he was finally sent down to a minor league club in Birmingham.

The point is that we each have our strengths. Each of us has places that God can use us most effectively. The secret, I believe, of having a strong and vital church is to make certain that every one of us is using the gift or gifts that God has graciously given to us...that we are doing what we can do the very best. If we do not use our gifts to God's glory, if we fall short.... then it is a tragedy both for us and for the family of Christ. Are you using your gifts, your graces to the full measure?

Katherine Elliot, in a page from The Upper Room, compares it to a bottle of perfume. She writes,

"When I was about 10 years old, Grandma received a gift of perfume in a bottle that fascinated me. Made of green pottery with a long, slender neck and a square bottom, it looked like pictures I had seen of ancient ware. I begged Grandma to open it. 'No' she said, 'I'm going to save it til later'. When I was 33, Grandma gave the perfume to me saying, 'Let's see how long you can keep it without opening it....'

One day when I picked up the perfume bottle, I was shocked to discover that it was empty, although still sealed. Turning it over, I could see why. The bottom of the bottle had never been glazed. The perfume had slowly evaporated through the porous clay. How sad that no one ever enjoyed the perfume....not Grandma or anyone else! How disappointing for the gift giver! Then it struck me that I frequently treat God's gifts to me in the same way...not using them because of shyness, selfishness, or just plain laziness. Failing to use our gifts disappoints God, and we deny others the opportunity to enjoy God's blessings with us....."

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### INTRODUCTION

Communication, as we all know, can be a very difficult thing. I came across a story about a blundering, wannabe robber with some speech difficulties down in Louisiana, who just couldn't win for losing. Sam Lincoln entered a small restaurant and speaking in his thick, backwoods Cajun accent ordered the waitress to "give me all the money". Unfortunately, she couldn't understand a word he said. To her it sounded like he was ordering "a sieve with all the honey".

In desperation, Sam turned to a patron and told him to hand over all his money. The patron could have sworn that Sam said "to live a big pile of bunny". When the patron couldn't understand him either, Sam got so frustrated that he pulled out a gun and pulled the trigger. Click. The gun wouldn't fire. Now Sam grabbed the cash register and began to run, but he didn't get very far...only about three feet. The register was still firmly plugged into the wall and he quickly ran out of cord. The register was jerked out of Sam's hands, and he fell. Frustrated and humiliated, he ran out of the restaurant empty-handed. All in the restaurant breathed a sign of relief and one of the patrons lifted the heavy cash register back up to its place on the counter. But five minutes later, Sam Lincoln was back. And this time, he made sure he unplugged the register before making off with it. Sam was ecstatic - for about three feet. A bystander knocked Sam down and made a citizen's arrest.

### DEVELOPMENT

Communication is difficult...especially if you come from the backwoods of Louisiana, but even under the best of circumstances it is problematic. How many times have you heard the phrase, "What we have here is a failure to communicate"? What was the name of the movie where we first heard that? Anyone remember?

Experts tell us that one of the most accurate means of discerning communication is to watch body language - a nod of the head, a shrug of the shoulders, crossing the arms over the chest...all may tell us what the other party is thinking far more accurately than the words that come from his or her lips. In fact, some business books advise people to feign interest by deliberately using specific body language. For example, one source states that,

"steeppling of hands is usually interpreted as a sign of deep thought. Doctors and psychiatric professionals traditionally steeple when listening to patients. Result: someone who deliberately steeples tends to be considered a deep thinker and a powerful, intelligent person. This expert recommends that business people steeple in meetings, or while listening to colleagues one-on-one."

I think that I'll give that a try the next time I'm in one of those two hour church meetings that edge toward dullness and boredom...and see if my words or my presence carries more weight. Body language - another way in which we communicate. I've noticed across the years that the body language of some here is different than it is at Yankee stadium.

ST. PAUL USES BODY LANGUAGE

Today is January 25th and on this date the church pauses to celebrate the "re-birth" of a man. Any of you remember whose day this is? It's St. Paul's and I always like to turn to Paul on the day of his "rebirth" and take on a text from his writings.

I noted that he was using some body language in our scripture reading for today when he tries to describe how a church is supposed to operate. Oh, I don't know if he steepled his hands or not. He used body language of a different sort. What St. Paul does is compare members of a church to parts of a body. Some of us are eyes, some ears. Some of us are mouths, some feet, and some of us are noses and I'll leave it to you to figure out who among us is what.

EACH ONE OF US IS INDISPENSABLE

Paul's message is a very simple one and yet it is also vital. First of all, St. Paul says, each one of us is indispensable. A physical body is in trouble if it loses one of its members. So is the body of Christ.

Arnold Prater has turned Paul's teaching into a parable. Once upon a time, he says, almost everybody was an ear. All the ears had a big convention and were having a wonderful time when a nose and a mouth walked in, sat down on the back row, and were very quiet. But soon the sergeant-at-arms walked over and said,

"You fellows don't look like ears to me. I'm kicking you out!"

And so the nose and the mouth left. But after a while the convention hall caught fire and destroyed all the ears because no noses were there to smell the smoke and no mouths were there to warn them the place was on fire! A person who loses her sense of smell suffers. A person who loses his eyes is in serious trouble. St. Paul is saying the same thing about members of Christ's body, the church. Every one of us is essential. Everyone is needed and is indispensable.

C. S. Lewis once said something about the church that I believe is important to remember. He said that the model many of us have in our minds for the church is the same model we have to secular organizations. That is, we think of the church as an organization that we join. Then we do what members of an organization normally do - we come to meetings and we pay dues. And maybe we read occasionally the organization's monthly news letter, if we have time. This is not Christ's model for the church. Christ's intent is that his people will be joined to His church in the same way that members of a physical body are joined to that body. It is a living relationship. The body gives life to its members and they, in turn, are indispensable to the body. For the person in whom Christ dwells, being actively involved in church is not merely an option - anymore than an eye has an option about being involved with a physical body. Losing an eye is a tragedy for both the eye and for the body. Christ is saying that each of us is indispensable. We all have a place in his family.

INDISPENSABLE, BUT WE ARE ALSO DIFFERENT

We are indispensable, says St. Paul, but we are also different.

A nose and a mouth are different. Both are indispensable, but they are different. They have different functions, different gifts to bring to the body. So it is

with Christ's body. Some of us are strong at some things; others are strong at others. It would be a mistake to try to be something we are not. That would violate God's plan for our life.

According to news reports during the last Olympics, one of the most popular places in the Olympic Village was the bowling alley. Interestingly enough, Olympic athletes weren't that good at bowling. One source reports that in more than a half-hour of viewing, she didn't see one strike bowled. Just because you have strengths in one area, doesn't mean you have strengths in others.

Those of you who are basketball fans remember a few years back when Michael Jordan decided he should be a professional baseball player. He put on the right uniform and he used the right equipment. He was even assigned to play right field, but watching Michael Jordan play baseball was not anything like watching #33 play basketball. Fly balls they say him in the chest. His swing lagged inches behind a fast ball. He referred to the umpires as "referees". He ended up being sent down to a Birmingham minor league club.

Each of us have strengths. Each of us has places God can use us most effectively. The secret of having a strong and vital church is to make certain that every one of us is using the give God has given us - that we are doing what we can do best. If we do not use our gifts to God's glory, it is a tragedy both for us and for the family of Christ.

Katherine Elliot compares it to a bottle of perfume. She writes,

"When I was about 10 years old, Grandma received a gift of perfume in a bottle that fascinated me. Made of green pottery with long, slender neck and a square bottom, it looked like pictures I had seen of ancient ware. I begged Grandma to open it. 'No' she said, 'I'm going to save it until later'. When I was 33, Grandma gave the perfume to me saying, 'Let's see how long you can keep it without opening it.'...

One day when I picked up the perfume bottle, I was shocked to discover that it was empty, although still sealed. Turning it over, I could see why. The bottom of the bottle had never been glazed. The perfume had slowly evaporated through the porous clay. How sad that that no one ever enjoyed the perfume...not Grandma or anyone else! How disappointing for the gift giver! Then it struck me that I frequently treat God's gifts to me in the same way, not using them because of shyness, selfishness, or just plain laziness. Failing to use our gifts disappoints God, and we deny others the opportunity to enjoy God's blessings with us."

That is God's will for God's people - that we shall use our gifts, regardless of what those gifts may be.

Pastor Jamie Buckingham tells about a man whose gift is taking out the garbage. Now most of us wouldn't consider taking out the garbage as a gift, but this man does. He stops by a neighbor's house three times a week just to empty his garbage. The neighbor is an invalid. This man says he receives great joy in fulfilling his gift in life - taking out his neighbor's garbage. What gift do you have to offer Christ? There is something each of us can do to advance Christ's Kingdom. We all have gifts and each of those gifts is important. We are all necessary and no one is better or worse than another. No one gift is more important than any other gift in the church. We are indispensable and remember, yes - we are different.

SHARE ONE GIFT

The third thing that Paul says to us is that we share one gift...the greatest gift of all - that is the gift of love. In fact, our lesson for the day leads right into chapter 13 of First Corinthians, in which St. Paul says that no matter how many other gifts we have, if we don't have love, we don't have anything.

That splendid story teller John R. Aurelio used Paul's analogy for a story in his book, COLORS. He says that one day when the heart was feeling in an especially critical and cranky mood, it said to the lungs,

"Stop nudging me inside. Who do you think you are anyway? You're so filled with your own self-importance that you're trying to take over the whole place." "You should talk" the lungs exploded. "Do you ever march to a different drummer? No! All you do all day long is beat your own drum. The noise is making me crazy. Come to think of it, I'm sick of it and I'm sick of you."

Well, the battle lines were drawn. The two of them continued on this way for days, the one beating the same issue to death while the other just kept blowing hot air about it.

"We'll see about this...." the heart finally said, pounding furiously as it told its story to the mouth. The mouth agreed with the heart and bit its lip in anger. "We'll see how swelled up the lungs will be if I hold back" it spat out. In retaliation the lungs told its story to the stomach. The stomach became very upset and agreed not to feed into the heart's monotonous monologue. Before long all the other organs began taking sides - the nose with the mouth and lungs, the liver and spleen with the stomach, while the kidneys were split in two. Alas, the argument never came to a head, not that it would have done much good, for by this time the body was so divided and weak - it died."

This can happen to a church. It makes no difference how talented members of a church are, or how able the leadership of the church, if people in that church don't love one another, that church will die. The most important gift, Paul tells us, is love. Even more important, the love of Christ is what we have to offer the world.

CLOSING

James Hewett tells about a family that had gone to the movies, and on the way in the young man of the family stopped by the refreshment stand to pick up some popcorn. By the time he got into the theater the lights were already dim. He scanned the theater and evidently couldn't find his family. He paced up and down the aisles looking for a familiar face. When the lights began to dim even further, he finally stopped and cried out, "Doesn't anyone recognize me?" And there he stood with his popcorn in one hand and a coke in the other...shaking and stumbling.

Hewett goes on to say that when visitors come into our churches they are looking for family, for companionship. And often they stand neglected in the aisles, in the narthex or foyer or out on the side walk or over to the side of our fellowship hall with coffee cup in hand, after the service. In the deep recesses of their hearts these people are calling out, some even crying out, "Doesn't anyone recognize me?" Friends, you and I ~~offer~~ offer to them to offer them genuine love and concern - the love and concern of Christ.

This is what the church is all about. This is who you and I are. We are members of the body of Christ - all of us. Not members as the world thinks of members of an organization...but living members attached permanently to the body - each indispensable, but different. All joined to one another and to the world for whom Christ dies by an amazing love that longs to call all of the world's people to become "one" in Christ Jesus our Lord.

PRAYER

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Communication, as we all know, can at times be a very difficult thing. How many times have you heard the phrase, "What we have here is a failure to communicate?" Where's that from? What was the name of the movie? Who said it?

I came across a story about a blundering, "wannabe" robber with some speech difficulties down in Louisiana, who just couldn't win for losing. Sam Lincoln entered a small restaurant and speaking in his thick, backwoods Cajun accent ordered the waitress to "give me all the money". Unfortunately, the poor waitress had difficulty understanding him. She thought he ordering "a sieve with all the honey".

In desperation, Sam Lincoln turned to a customer sitting there at the counter and told him to hand over all his money. The customer could have sworn that Sam Lincoln said "to live a big pile of bunny". When the patron at the counter failed to understand him, Sam Lincoln got so frustrated that he pulled out a gun and pulled the trigger. Click. Thank heavens...the gun didn't fire.

Really frustrated, Sam grabbed the cash register and began to run, but he didn't get very far for the register was firmly plugged into the wall and he quickly ran out of cord. As the register was jerked out of Sam's hands, he fell to the floor but he got up quickly and run out of the restaurant...empty-handed and humiliated. Everyone in the restaurant breathed a sign of relief and one customer even went over to the cash register and picked it up...it was heavy...and put it back on the counter. But five minutes later, Sam Lincoln was back to finish the job. Unplugging the cash register this time, he was backing out the door feeling ecstatic....for about three seconds and three feet. A bystander knocked him down and made a citizen's arrest. End of story.

Communication is difficult...especially if you come from the backwoods of Louisiana...but even under the best of circumstances it is problematic...uncertain.

### DEVELOPMENT

According to the experts, one of the most accurate means of discerning communication is to watch body language - a nod of the head, a shrug of the shoulders, crossing the arms over the chest, clasping the hands in back...all may tell us what the other party is thinking far more accurately than the words that come from his or her lips. In fact, some business books advise people to feign interest by deliberately using specific body language. One source, for example, suggests:

"Steepling of hands is usually interpreted as a sign of deep thought. Doctors and psychiatric professionals traditionally 'steeple' when listening to patients. Result: someone who deliberately 'steeples' tends to be considered a deep thinker and a powerful, intelligent person. This expert recommends that business people 'steeple' in meetings...or while listening to colleagues one-on-one..."

I think I'll give that a try the next time I'm in a church meeting that edges toward dullness and boredom and see if my words of my presence carries more weight if I go to the trouble of "steeping"

Paul, in today's scripture reading, was using some body language when he described how a church is supposed to operate. Chances are he didn't "steeple" his hands, but he used body language of a different sort. What St. Paul did or does is to compare members of a church to the various parts of a body. Some of us are eyes, and some are ears. Some of us are mouths, some feet, and some of us are noses....and I'll leave it to you to figure out who among us is what.

EACH ONE OF US IS INDISPENSABLE

Paul's message here in this chapter is a very simple one and yet it is also vital.

First of all, Paul is saying that each one of us is indispensable. A physical body is in trouble if it loses one of its members, and so, too, is the body of Christ. We need to remember that...

Arnold Prater has turned Paul's teaching into a bit of a parable. Once upon a time, he says, almost everybody was an ear. All the ears had a big convention and were having a wonderful time when a nose and a mouth walked in, sat down on the back row and were very quiet. But soon the sergeant-at-arms walked over and said,

"You fellows don't look like ears to me.  
I'm kicking you out!" And so the nose  
and the mouth left...

But after a while the convention hall caught fire and destroyed all the ears because no noses were there to smell the smoke and no mouths were there to warn everyone that the place was on fire! A person who loses her sense of smell suffers. A person who loses his eyes is in serious trouble. And st. Paul is saying the same thing about members of Christ's body - the Church. Every one of us is essential. Everyone is needed and is indispensable.

C. S. Lewis whom some of you have read once said something about the church that I believe is important for us to remember. He said that the model many of us have in our minds for the church is the same model we have for secular organizations. That is, we think of the church as an organization that we join. And then we do what members of an organization normally do....we come to meetings and we pay our dues, and maybe we read the organization's monthly news bulletin, if we have time. But this is not Christ's model for the Church.

Christ's intent is that His people will be joined to His Church in the same way that members of a physical body are joined to that body. It is a "living" relationship. The body gives life to its members and they, in turn, are indispensable to the body. For the person in whom Christ dwells, being actively involved in church is not merely an option....anymore than an eye has an option about being involved with a physical body. Losing an eye is a tragedy for both the eye and for the body.

Christ is saying that each of us is indispensable. We all have a place in His family. We all have a place at His table. I have always appreciated the words of Harry Emerson Fosdick who use to say to his people at Riverside Church,

"A really Christian Church must be 'personality centered', it's criterion of value the saving experiences which come to individuals...keep your eyes on individuals. Nothing in the long run matters in this church save what happens to them".

INDISPENSABLE, BUT WE ARE ALSO DIFFERENT

Yes, we are indispensable, says Paul....but we are also different.

A nose and a mouth are different. Both are indispensable, but they are different. They have different functions...different gifts to bring to the body. So it is with Christ's body. Some of us are strong at some things; others are strong at others. It would be a mistake to try to be something we are not. That would violate God's plan for our life.

During the last Olympic games, one of the most popular places in the Olympic Village was the bowling alley. Interestingly enough, Olympic athletes weren't that good at bowling. One source reported that in more than a half-hour of viewing, she didn't see one strike bowled. Just because you have strengths in one area, doesn't mean that you have strengths in others.

Basketball fans present will remember how a few years ago Michael Jordan decided he should be a professional baseball player. He put on the right uniform and he used the right equipment and was even assigned to play right field but watching Michael Jordan play baseball was not anything like watching him play basketball. They say that fly balls hit him in the chest. They said that his swing lagged inches behind a fast ball. Number 33 even referred to the umpires as "referees". You'll remember that he was finally sent down to a minor league club in Birmingham.

The point is that we each have our strengths. Each of us has places that God can use us most effectively. The secret, I believe, of having a strong and vital church is to make certain that every one of us is using the gift or gifts that God has graciously given to us...that we are doing what we can do the very best. If we do not use our gifts to God's glory, if we fall short.... then it is a tragedy both for us and for the family of Christ. Are you using your gifts, your graces to the full measure?

Katherine Elliot, in a page from The Upper Room, compares it to a bottle of perfume. She writes,

"When I was about 10 years old, Grandma received a gift of perfume in a bottle that fascinated me. Made of green pottery with a long, slender neck and a square bottom, it looked like pictures I had seen of ancient ware. I begged Grandma to open it. 'No' she said, 'I'm going to save it til later'. When I was 33, Grandma gave the perfume to me saying, 'Let's see how long you can keep it without opening it....'

One day when I picked up the perfume bottle, I was shocked to discover that it was empty, although still sealed. Turning it over, I could see why. The bottom of the bottle had never been glazed. The perfume had slowly evaporated through the porous clay. How sad that no one ever enjoyed the perfume....not Grandma or anyone else! How disappointing for the gift giver! Then it struck me that I frequently treat God's gifts to me in the same way...not using them because of shyness, selfishness, or just plain laziness. Failing to use our gifts disappoints God, and we deny others the opportunity to enjoy God's blessings with us....."

That is God's will for God's people....that we shall use our gifts, regardless of what those gifts may be. A colleague tells about a man whose gift, believe it or not, is taking out the garbage. Most of us wouldn't consider taking out the garbage as a gift, but this man does. He stops by a neighbor's house three times a week just to empty his garbage. His neighbor is an invalid. This man says that he receives great joy in fulfilling his gift in life....taking out his neighbor's garbage.

Let me place this question on your heart? What gift do you have to offer Christ? There is something each of us can do to advance Christ's kingdom. We all have gifts and each of those gifts is important. We are all necessary and no one is better or worse than another. No one gift is more important than any other gift in the church. Yes, first we are indispensable. Second, yes... we are different...different gifts, interests, skills...

SHARE OUR GIFT

The third thing that Paul says to us is that we share one gift....to him the greatest gift of all....that is the gift of love. Notice how the lesson for today leads right into chapter 13 of First Corinthians, in which Paul says that no matter how many other gifts we have, if we don't have LOVE, we don't have anything! That's the bottom line. Faith. Hope. Love...

That splendid story-teller, John Aurelio, used Paul's analogy for a story in his book, Colors. He says that one day when the heart was feeling in an especially cranky, critical, grouchy and grumpy mood, it said to the lungs,

"Stop nudging me inside. Who do you think you are anyway? You're so filled with your own self-importance that you're trying to take over the whole place". "You should talk" the lungs exploded...."Do you ever march to a different drummer? No! All you do all day long is beat your own drum. The noise is making me crazy. Come to think of it, I'm sick of it. And I'm sick of you."

Well....with that explosion, the battle lines were drawn. The two of them continued on this way for days....the one beating the same issue to death while the other just kept blowing hot air about it....

"We'll see about this...." the heart finally said, pounding furiously as it told its story to the mouth. The mouth agreed with the heart and bit its lip in anger. "We'll see how swelled up the lungs will be if I hold back", it spat out. In retaliation the lungs told its story to the stomach. The stomach became very upset and greed not to feed into the heart's monotonous monologue. Before long all the other organs began taking sides - the nose with the mouth and the lungs....the liver and the spleen with the stomach....while the kidneys were 'split in two'. Alas, the argument never came to a head, not that it would have done much good - for by this time the body was so divided and weak - it died."

The point is this: this can happen to a church. It makes little difference how talented members of a church are..or how able the leadership of the church...

IF people in that church don't care and love each other - that church is in trouble. The church could die. The most important gift, Paul tells us, is love. Even more important, the love of Christ is what we have to offer the world.

CLOSING A recent rerun on Seinfeld describes Jerry, Elaine, Kramer and George at the movies...but not sitting together...scattered around the theater. George comes in from the refreshment stand...popcorn in one hand, a coke in the other....the lights are dimmed and he is scanning the theater and looking for his three friends. He paces up and down the aisles looking for a familiar face - Jerry, or Elaine or Kramer.....and when the lights begin to dim ever further, he finally stops and cries out, "Doesn't anyone recognize me?" And there he stands with his hands full, shaking and stumbling....in the semi-darkness of the movie theater.

When visitors come in to our churches they are looking for family, for friends, for companionship, and yes - even for God. Often they stand neglected in the aisles, or in the narthex or the foyer or over to one side of our community room downstairs....with coffee cup and refreshments in hand. In the deep recesses of their hearts they may be calling out, "Doesn't anyone recognize me?" Friends....you and I owe it to them to offer them genuine love and concern - the love and concern, hopefully, of Christ. Remember, please....

This is what the church is all about. This is who you and I are. We are members of the body of Christ - all of us. Not members as the world thinks of members of an organization, but living members attached permanently to the body....each indispensable, each different. All joined to one another and to the world for whom Christ died by an "amazing love"....that longs to call all of the world's people to become "ONE" in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments that come at the end of this service, O God. Remind us that our lives are "linked" together...in love...to each other and to Him in whom we see life's highest hope as well as its deepest meaning. This we ask in the spirit of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who knows His sheep by name and who gently calls them home to Himself. Amen.