



Westminster Presbyterian Church  
1200 Marquette Avenue  
Minneapolis, MN 55403  
(612) 332-3421  
[www.westminstermpls.org](http://www.westminstermpls.org)

*No Future Without Belonging*

Timothy Hart-Andersen

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*I Corinthians 12:4-6, 12-21, 26-27*

One evening during our sojourn to New Mexico this past summer, we were introduced to Native American hoop dance. Among the indigenous peoples of this land, hoop dancing serves as a cultural expression of Native commitment to the healing of a wounded human community and a suffering creation.

President Biden has declared tomorrow, October 11, the first-ever national Indigenous Peoples Day. It is a re-interpretation of the traditional Columbus Day in light of the reality of what happened in the encounter of European and Native cultures. It is one more way to remember and honor the traditions of the Native peoples who lived here long before Europeans arrived, and who are still here.

Westminster sits on what was once land where the Dakota people lived, until forcibly removed by European settlers.

The gifted young hoop dancer we saw that evening was from the Hopi tribe. She's a national champion hoop

dancer and has taken the Native American art form around the world with Cirque du Soleil.  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UEfNlSnr30>)

Her dance began with five hoops on the ground, each barely touching the other, distinct in its placement. Some dancers use many more hoops. Other dancers make their own hoops, decorating them with different colors and symbols. The dancer's task is to unite the hoops, one by one, bringing them together as they move to sounds of drum and chant.

The dancer that evening circled slowly, and then flipped the first hoop up her body. She added another and another, dancing with them in ways that brought things to life - a bird soaring, a turtle crawling. With each successive hoop more things appeared - a bowl, a ladder, a horse, the wind, a storm.

It was more than mere entertainment. Watching the dance stirred our spirits and opened our eyes and our hearts to see new possibilities in life when we work together, possibilities that had been there all along, discovered when we let go of that which separates us.

The dancers do with hoops what the Apostle Paul does with words: envision a world that works together for the good of all.

When Paul writes to the young Corinthian church struggling with division and rancor, he uses the image of the human body to help them understand the unity God has given to them already. It's so simple it's disarming: "The body does not consist of one member, but of many," he says. "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.'"

Disunion in the church in first century Corinth was such a serious issue that the Apostle Paul devotes much of his first letter to that topic. He addresses it head-on in the first chapter: "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters," Paul writes,

"That all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me...that there are quarrels among you...What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.'"

Then, to drive home his point about how dangerous such fracturing among them is, Paul asks, “Has Christ been divided?” (1 Corinthians 1:10-13)

As I read this passage, I admit that I do find some consolation in the reality that even back then, people didn't always get along well – and from what the Apostle says, that may be putting it mildly: it must have been some fierce church fight in Corinth. We don't fully know what was driving their divisions, but these folks were not getting along – maybe even at each other's throats.

Paul uses the body analogy to make it painfully obvious that if something has crept in among them – injustice or inequities or mutual hatred – the Corinthians have fallen far short of what God intended for human community.

The scene in first century Corinth was complicated and divided, not unlike our nation today. It was a crossroads in the ancient world, where Greek philosophy met Roman power and often were not compatible; where sea traders and land merchants haggled over prices for goods and didn't always agree; where enslaved people labored for and chafed under those who “owned” them; and, where differing and competing religious claims clashed openly.

With his words, Paul hopes to bring healing to that wounded community. He wants to help them to pick up the scattered parts and find their way back to life together.

If he had been born a member of the Hopi or Apache or Cherokee nation, Paul might have grown into a champion hoop dancer himself. Just as the hoops cannot work together if one of them asserts its independence from the others or chooses to think of itself as better than the other hoops, or refuses to cooperate, so the body cannot function well if one part goes its own way. Paul knew that.

“If the foot would say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body,” he says.

It’s so helpful when scripture says the obvious.

“If the ear would say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body.”

If hubris infects the body – a feeling of selfish pride that elevates one part and denigrates another – then the body

malfunctions, as it did in Corinth 2,000 years ago, and as it still happens today.

Hubris has infected the American body today, and we are not well. It manifests itself in our communities and our politics, in our public institutions and corporations and churches. We may still be one country, but with so many parts thinking they're better than others, the body is in trouble. The hoops aren't working together; in fact, some of them are broken.

There's cultural hubris, thinking our traditions or ethnicity or skin color are somehow better than someone else's. Racism is an extreme form of cultural hubris, and we are sorely afflicted with it in this country.

There's virtue hubris, when we need others to know how righteous we are, often at their expense. Being "woke," or "owning" someone by our self-determined superior worthiness, does not build up the body.

There's theological hubris, thinking some religious beliefs or practices are better than others and, therefore, deserve a higher place in the hierarchy of sacred claims. We do not

need to judge others' religions to make ours true and right and good.

And there's what has been called "epistemic hubris" - knowledge hubris - where we insist we know something to be true based on asserted unverifiable "facts," or assume we need not know facts because we have substituted our own opinions for them.

(<http://www.daedalustrust.com/epistemic-vices-in-organizations-knowledge-truth-and-unethical-conduct-2018/>)

There is no future in living like this. We are awash in a sea of hubris, and it is debilitating to the body.

"If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?"

The antidote to hubris is modesty, and humility. "...Walk humbly with our God." We have forgotten the humble truth that every part of the body brings value, and every part of the body helps create the whole, as the hoops do when they begin to move together.

We have forgotten the dance.

James Baldwin wrote an essay two days after the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., when any meaningful progress toward racial justice in this nation seemed to have been shut down forever. “The hope of the world,” Baldwin said in that awful moment, “Lies in what one demands, not of others, but of oneself.”

(<https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a14443780/james-baldwin-mlk-funeral/>)

How do we move beyond the national paralysis in which we find ourselves? How do we discover again what we once knew but never fully lived into – that there is no future for us without belonging to one another, even with all our deep brokenness, even smothered, as we are right now, by various hatreds and fears? How do we start to climb out of the abyss?

Baldwin offers a beginning point: The hope of the world lies not in what we demand of others, but in what we demand of ourselves.

That’s what Paul was saying to the Corinthians, and what he’s saying to us in the church today: following Jesus

changes us. It makes us new people. We say this every Sunday when we confess our brokenness and then discover God's grace that makes us new people. Following Jesus allows us to let go of old ways and move forward into the future. It expects us to speak up and stand up for justice, but not at the expense of someone else's humanity. That's the old way.

As a church and as individual Christians, what we do and who we are really matters. We live in the painful realities of the present, even as we help shape a more hopeful future. We're learning to live, and to love, in new ways, in more equitable ways, showing others that it can be done. We - and here I mean specifically Westminster Presbyterian Church - we are helping shape this city, as we try to live in new ways, by the power of this one whom we follow, Jesus Christ.

The challenges in our land and in this town are enormous and deeply embedded. They appear overwhelming. Finding our way into a better future for all seems daunting, even impossible.

Here's Baldwin again: "Not everything that is faced can be changed," he said, "But nothing can be changed until it is

faced.” (<https://www.kinfolk.com/confronting-history-james-baldwin/>)

That is why God created the church: to face the pain and brokenness of world with the love and justice of God. That’s why Paul urged the Corinthian Christians to find their way back to one another. He wasn’t concerned about unity for its own sake, but because it empowers the church to be a force for good in the world beyond it.

When the church is healthy and its various parts are collaborating in hope, it can face anything. That’s true of the human community as well. When we learn how to work together, we have a chance of making this a better world – a good chance.

The hoop dance that evening concluded with a surprise. The hoops were not laid back down, separately, apart from one another, as I had expected. When the drumming stopped the dancer had made the five hoops into a globe. They were all bound together by their own tension, fitting into one another, holding each other in an interlocking series of circles.

She put the hoops down on the ground, and they did not fall over, separate. And then she spoke; "The hoops," she said, "Are doing something now they never could have done by themselves. They are sitting upright."

The hoop of a wounded creation had been healed. The many had become one, changed by their encounter with the other.

In that little globe of hope, they now belonged to one another, and it made all the difference in the world.

There is no future without belonging.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.