

Body, Mind, Vine, and Fruit

A Short Meditation on Biblical Metaphors
and Spiritual Discernment

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A Word of Introduction

Over the last few months, I find that I have been reflecting almost daily on my faith community as a body. I do not mean an abstract body of beliefs or a body of doctrine or even a body of practice. I mean a living breathing organic entity with skin and bones, spleen and spine and many other intricately interconnected parts. I find that there is something profoundly useful and timely about this organic metaphor of community as body.

I was raised in a Bible-reading household, so I have been aware of St. Paul's image of the body of Christ for a long time. However, there was a period of my life – a very long period – where I found traditional Bible interpretation suffocatingly doctrinal and unhelpful. As a result, I looked for truth to science and to other faith traditions, and I discovered much of value. Years later, when Spirit drove me to seminary, I found myself surprised to be reading the Bible in new light.

As a result of these experiences, I enjoy sharing Bible study with groups that include people who have never read the Bible, those who remain suspicious of it, and those who carry their dog-eared copy wherever they go. I'm hoping this reflection appeals to all three camps.

I'm also hoping it appeals to those of both a religious and scientific bent, since I myself am bent those ways. The image of the body resonates with my experience as a systems engineer as well as with my affection for the natural world. We need more appreciation of the wisdom by *both* our faith traditions *and* the creation. As our limited human understanding of living systems grows, I find Paul's metaphor of the body more and more inspired.

At the same time, I find that our faith communities are troubled with conflict, tensions, and a sense of fatigue. It's not that our faith or even our witness in the world is weak, but the internal frictions within the community wear us down rather than build us up. Distrust grows. Unity feels elusive. We are surprised and alarmed by factional disagreements. The situation feels strangely reminiscent of the situation in churches to which Paul wrote letters two millennia ago.

In some ways I suspect we have inadvertently “conformed to this world” with its intense focus on individual identity. It is hard for us to even imagine community except as a projection of individual wills. Driven as we are, we expect our community to act like a machine that should support our individual religious experience rather than as a living breathing body of faith.

At a recent Quaker gathering, the plenary theme was: *“Practicing Spiritual Discernment: Where Does the Light Lead Us Now?”* That topic nudged me into speaking of metaphor – of body, vine and fruit – as a means for finding our way. Since I worship as a Quaker, I will likely resort to Quaker language occasionally, but I find the same challenges in many faith communities. I offer these short Biblical studies to any who might find them helpful for renewal and reflection.

Peace.

1 Discernment

I pray that the eyes of your heart be enlightened. [Eph 1:18, NIV]

When I had almost completed this pamphlet, all the sections seemed finished and complete. But I felt a growing unease, a haunting disquiet. I stared at the words, but they made sense. My everyday eyes could see no problem. What I had written remained the best that I could do.

Lying in bed one night, I found myself oddly awake and at peace. Crickets chirped. A pale moon shown through the open window. And, as if illuminated by that pale silver light, I clearly discerned what I needed to do. I got up and wrote the words on this page. I had *discerned* that I had forgotten *discernment*.

What is spiritual discernment? We tend to use the word discernment rather casually, if we use it at all. The title of the plenary that motivated this pamphlet was “*Practicing Spiritual Discernment: Where Does the Light Lead Us Now?*” The words combine a call to practice with a question we’d like answered. The combination suggests, inadvertently one hopes, that discernment is like a Ouija board. We ask a question of the spirit world and wait for the finger to slide towards “yes” or “no.” But that’s not quite right, is it?

The word ‘discern’ traces back through Old French to Latin, carrying with it meanings of ‘distinguishing between’ or ‘separating by sifting.’ Memories of sifting carry me back to my days in sedimentary geology class, shoveling spadeful of dirt into graded sieves and shaking them hard and long to separate clay - from silt - from sand - from gravel - to finally reveal the occasional artifact—a fossil perhaps or a pottery shard – that would make one stop and wonder. Here in the West, we could easily think of panning for gold, swirling sand away with the river water to reveal the improbable glimmer of precious metal.

So to discern is to shake and sift away what doesn’t matter to reveal what does. But here’s the thing I have found: We don’t shake ourselves well. We are full of accumulated silt, but we can’t sift our own muck.

The early Quakers, George Fox and Margaret Fell, sometimes used the word ‘discern’ in a different manner than modern usage, one that is perhaps far more helpful in understanding spiritual discernment. For Fox and Fell, we are not always the active agents. We are not the sifters doing discernment – but the thing being sifted and discerned. For example, they write that *the Light discerns the Heart*¹ – it separates intentions. It sifts the “precious” from the “vile.” We are shaken. We are sifted. We become the object, not the subject, of discernment.

Personally, I can recall times when I have been shaken and clarity has come upon me from the outside. Occasionally it has been in the midst of crisis, literally in an ambulance or

¹ For example, George Fox in “Priests and professors catechisme” 1657; Margaret Fell in “to All the Professors of the World” 1656.

emergency room. But more often, it has come in the very quietest of moments – in worship, or while lying still in bed with crickets chirping and the moon shining through the window.

Discernment also comes through community. When we can't or won't shake ourselves, Spirit calls on others to do the shaking. It happens, for example, with a word spoken in worship or a question asked during a clearness committee that cuts to the heart. It materializes in human embrace or in being held in the Light. The experience feels like dust devils settling, like river water washing away the mud, leaving gold in the pan. Vision clears, and we see with “the eyes of the heart.”

Just as there's a role for the community in individual discernment, there's a role for the individual in corporate discernment. Finding that relationship is the subject of this journey into biblical metaphors, because discernment also comes through collective wisdom – through stories, through art and any medium that reveals the flash of the divine in the ordinary.

In the apocryphal biblical book of Baruch, the writer relates discernment to our ability to recognize the presence of God through attributes such as wisdom, strength, understanding, life, light, and peace:

*Learn where there is wisdom,
where there is strength,
where there is understanding,
so that you may at the same time discern
where there is length of days, and life,
where there is light for the eyes, and peace.* [Baruch 3:14,NRSV]²

Hopefully, with a little shaking, we will discover some unexpected treasures in the words of ancient writers and find “light for the eyes, and peace.”

- In your experience, when have you had to sift out a spiritual leading from other concerns? How did one concern feel separable from the other?
- When have you felt that *you were being sifted*?
- In your experience, how has discernment been related to your understanding of the divine?

² All subsequent biblical passages are New Revised Standard Version [NRSV] unless noted otherwise.

2 Metaphor, Parable and Model

*Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables;
without a parable he told them nothing.* [Matt 13:34]

In the Gospels, Jesus often begins a parable with these words: “*The kingdom of God is like ...*”³ and then names some highly unlikely thing— a mustard seed, perhaps, or yeast, or a fisherman’s net, or a merchant looking for pearls. Those of us who grew up reading the Bible may have a disadvantage hearing just how outrageous these similes must have sounded to their first audience. After all, yeast was seen as a rot. Mustard is a common weed, and the merchant is, well, greedy. But the analogy insists that the unlike things, like the kingdom of God and a greedy merchant, are somehow “like.”

Metaphors stretch these analogies a bit further by dropping even the word “like.” Did you notice the metaphor that slipped in at the beginning of each parable? What is the *kingdom* of God, after all? Whatever it is, it certainly doesn’t sound like the political institution we call a kingdom. And yet, the parables say with a wink: let’s call it a kingdom and see where we go.

Sometimes, the gospels insist, Jesus spoke in parables to be obscure. He was a marked man after all.⁴ But other time it’s obvious that Jesus felt the meaning was clear to anyone who had ears.

*“Whoever has ears, let them hear?”*⁵

By the way, wink wink, he’s not talking only about the fleshy little nubs on the sides of our head. He is using physical ears as a metaphor for some deeper form of discernment. But for those who met him, “ears” did hear. They particularly heard and remembered the parables. As Clarence Jordan once quipped:

*I think one of the big troubles with Jesus’ sermons
was that people could understand them.*⁶

The Gospel of John drops parables in favor of “I am” statements, but that only ups the metaphorical ante. “I am,” says Jesus, “the bread”, “the light”, “the gate”, “the good shepherd”, “the way”, “the truth”, “the life”, and “the vine” We’ll consider that last one in a moment. But it’s also worth noting that Jesus calls his disciples nicknames like “the rock”, calls them family, calls them servants, and ultimately calls them friends. We are left to mix metaphors and discern what it might mean to be a family of the Way, servants of Light, and friends of Truth.

³ Or the Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew is reluctant to name G*d.

⁴ Matt 22:15-22, the saying about the coin with the emperor’s portrait is a great example of evading entrapment.

⁵ This phrase occurs for example at Matt 11:15 and at the end of other parables. Wording is the NIV translation.

⁶ Clarence Jordan, *The Substance of Faith*, (Wipf & Stock Pub, 2005), 20. Clarence Jordan (1912-1969) was the founder of the Koinonia Farm in Georgia and a Biblical scholar of equal wit and wisdom.

Although it sounds odd to our everyday ears, metaphors are similar to scientific models. Really. Take it from someone who works with both. They represent and help us understand reality, even though they are not the thing, even though they are not strictly “true.”

To understand light – I mean the physical moonlight streaming through the window, not the metaphorical Light that streams to the eyes of the heart – we can model it as physical particle. Or we can model it as a wave. It all depends on what question we are asking.

For a physicist, it’s like having two parables of light. “The kingdom of light is like a particle,” says one parable. “The kingdom of light is like a wave,” says the other. These two stories are in some ways contradictory, but that’s okay, because light is neither a particle nor a wave. We understand one thing about light by imagining it one way and another thing by imagining it the other. Both models are useful. In fact, we rely on them to design the disk drive that records these words.

Metaphors and models are like that. We can rely on them as long as we hold them lightly. We gain confidence by trying them out and finding them trustworthy. We only get into trouble when we insist, with truly “blind” faith, that the models are the real thing, that light *is* a particle or that Jesus is not just the bread of life, but a loaf of bread.

Early Christians, especially Paul, were masters of metaphor. They continued to experiment with words or phrases that would wake us up, open our spiritual ears and illuminate our experience of faith. The models of spiritual reality explored in the following sections are examples of that kind of experimentation

Body, mind, vine and fruit - do any of these metaphors still illuminate the way for us today? Or is it time to await new Light?

“Those who have ears, let them hear!”

- *Recall a story, parable or saying that rings particularly true to you. What makes it true?*
- *Jesus’ parables were probably jarring for the first listeners. Which, if any, are still jarring? Why?*
- *A scientific model can be tested. Can parables be tested? How?*
- *When has a symbol, image or metaphor helped illuminate your own spiritual way?*

3 The Vine

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says: “I am the vine, you are the branches.” We can be sure it’s the Gospel of John because Jesus is speaking in the first person about his divine identity which only happens in John’s Gospel. The other gospels have a very different “model” for how Jesus spoke and what Jesus said. But, like the other gospels, Jesus is insisting on a metaphorical reality.

*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed⁷ by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. **I am the vine, you are the branches.** Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but **I have called you friends**, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. [John 15:1-17]*

Did you catch the transition from vine and branches to loving one another, from servant to friends? Although Quakers are fond of the verse about being called friends,⁸ few would connect it with the image of the vine. How do they go together?

Well, let’s start at the beginning. “*I am the true vine and...*” (no, wait) “*my Father is the*

⁷ The text play with two Greek words for “cleanse” and “prune” that are similar.

⁸ Thus the official name of Quakers, “The Religious Society of Friends” or, more simply, “Friends of Truth.”

*vine-grower.*⁹ (By the way, it's worth pointing out that there's nothing like a capitalized "Father" in Greek, we simply capitalize *Father* to indicate, wink wink, that we recognize it is a metaphor for something else.)

But why is God the vine-grower? Why isn't God the root of the vine, for example? Today, we would probably prefer some logical consistency here, some sense of being "rooted in God." That would be a nice logical flow from root to vine to branches. But that's not what's written.

We have to realize that metaphors often get recycled. They come with the dents and dings from a history of prior use. The image of the vine and of the vine-grower has a *very* long heritage twining through the Hebrew scriptures.

One of the first appearances of God on Earth in the Bible shows the divine being wandering around during the cool of evening in a garden that he has just created.¹⁰ That garden closes its gates, but when it comes time for the Israelites to enter the promised land, Joshua's spies return, not with helpful tactical advice, but with an oversized cluster of grapes.¹¹ A cluster of grapes that requires two people to carry is a pretty good sign of how well the people will prosper if they just allow God to plant them in their new garden.

But Israel didn't prosper, at least not in the way intended by the gardener, so prophets like Isaiah compare Israel to a failed vineyard – to a vine that God has personally planted and tended but which bears only wild grapes.¹² In Jeremiah, even the vine itself has become obnoxious.¹³ (Fellow gardeners will know the feeling.)

Psalm 80 sings of Israel as this vine, transplanted from Egypt, but now abandoned and overrun among the crumbling ruins of its garden walls. The psalm pleads for the master gardener to return and restore the vineyard. It is no wonder, then, that several of Jesus' parables use the vineyard as a metaphor for Israel, and it's no wonder that the authorities in Jerusalem found exactly these stories so deeply offensive.¹⁴

So, God was already firmly established by Jesus' time as the vine-grower who had faithfully planted Israel in her promised land but had received nothing but sour grapes in return. Yet, even though fires are already burning to clear out the yard waste, the gospels insist that God is still laboring to save the damn vine. In the passage from John, this requires pruning shears.¹⁵ In a parable in Luke, it calls for a spade to dig around the fruitless fig tree and pour on manure.¹⁶ So God is not the root, but the root cutter. God is doggedly bent on saving his vine.

⁹ John 15:1.

¹⁰ Gen 3:8.

¹¹ Num 13:23.

¹² Isa 5:4.

¹³ Jer 2:21.

¹⁴ Read Matt 20:1-15, Matt 21:28-41 in this light.

¹⁵ John 15:2.

¹⁶ Luke 13:6-9. The image of the divine manure spreader has apparently not caught on among Christians.

In this context, Jesus becomes the answer to Psalm 80. He offers himself as the restorer of fruit to the land. His assertion is not so much that he is a vine but that he is the *true* vine that will finally bring the good fruit for which the gardener has labored so long.

“*I am the vine and you are the branches.*”¹⁷ This is a lovely and memorable metaphor for an intimate and nurturing connection with the disciples. And this relationship with the vine can’t help suggesting Eucharistic themes – the cup and the wine – because the fruit of the vine is now a product of the blood (or at least the sap) that flows in Jesus and in the community of the disciples.¹⁸

But can you find the problem this metaphor causes for Jesus? Not only is the vine separate from the gardener, but the branches are separate from one another. There’s a danger of “Jesus freaks” connecting to the vine but losing both God and community in the process.

Now it makes sense why Jesus switches from vine and branches to slave and friend.¹⁹ The vine and branches suggest a hierarchy, with Jesus as master and the disciple as slaves. Jesus asserts this is **not** what he means. Instead he calls the disciples *friends* because of the intimate shared relationship with himself and with the Father. He *abides* in the disciples and they *abide* in him. He *loves* them as the Father *loves* him. It gets complicated quickly. The easy hierarchical image of the vine and branches starts to get tangled by intimate inter-relationships.

But what about “commandments”? Jesus says he has kept his Father’s commandments and demands that his disciples keep his commandments. Doesn’t commandment establish a rather harsh hierarchy? Well, it depends on the command. Let’s follow the twisting vine:

How do we abide in the vine and in the love?

Jesus answers: “Keep my commandments.”²⁰

What commandments?

Jesus answers: “That you love one another as I have loved you.”²¹

Just in case we missed that loop back to love, he repeats it at the end of the passage, dropping himself in the process. How do we keep the commandments?

Three words: “Love one another.”²²

So, by the end of the analogy, branches remain part of the vine only by being intimately bound to one another through the vine. The hierarchy of the vine and the branches becomes a

¹⁷ John 15:5.

¹⁸ Note that only John’s gospel omits the ceremony of bread and wine at the Last Supper, substituting stories where Jesus declares himself the vine and bread of life.

¹⁹ The distinction between ‘servants’ and ‘slaves’ in Roman society is slim at best.

²⁰ John 15:10.

²¹ John 15:12.

²² John 15:17.

network of interconnection. Yes, Jesus is the “true” vine, but what makes the vine “true” is the love that flows through it – the love for one another. The blood of the vine is that love.

The vine metaphor succeeds where it addresses past metaphors and suggests that what was missing was an intimate organic connection, a shared life blood and a living, growing, fruitful community. But Jesus challenges his own metaphor when it suggests too much separation between the branches and too top-down a relationship.

Could we imagine a better metaphor? Well, to retain the organic imagery, the nearest living, growing analogy might be a fungus, connected intimately underground by a web of unseen mycelia and fruiting as mushrooms in the most unexpected places. That works, but I’m not sure we’d like to see ourselves as a Fungus of Faith.²³

There is, however, a modern analogy to this kind of interconnection: distributed computing, what we’ve come to call “the cloud.” In this sense, Jesus might very well say, “You are the nodes, and I am the network topology. Those who abide in me and I in them accomplish good because apart from me you can do nothing.” Sounds funny, but it comes surprisingly close to capturing what has become hard to hear in the original text: *Apart from me, you’ll be cut off from one another and all alone.*

But I’m not suggesting adopting a Network Topology of Faith. The problem, of course, is that this new metaphor, like so much of our culture, suggests we are machines. We lose sight of the richness and intimacy of an organic connection, of the body and the blood. What we need, especially in our time, is more earthiness to our metaphors, not less.

- *How is your community like a vine with branches? Like a garden? A fungus?*
- *When have you been pruned? Manured? What did that feel like?*
- *In your experience, when is it good to be “rooted” in a tradition? When not?*
- *What makes us a society of “friends”?*

²³ Although mushroom soup makers would likely be delighted to see traditional Christians celebrate the Eucharist in an entirely new way.

4 The Fruit

The metaphor of the vine is naturally associated with another metaphor – the fruit. Connected to the vine which was planted by the master-gardener, we are expected to “bear fruit.” But the gospel text does not elaborate on the nature of that fruit.

There is probably some sense where being fruitful echoes God’s command in Genesis to be fruitful and multiply. Being fruitful hints at harvest, and harvest calls to mind John’s image of “harvesting” those who are ready to join the growing community.²⁴ One of the ways we are fruitful is that we multiply.²⁵

But, more often than not in the New Testament, there’s a sense that fruit relates to doing good, and it is associated with the discernment necessary to recognize good and bad. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus says:

*No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. [Luke 6:43-45]*²⁶

Watch your mouth! Or better, watch our mouths! Listen carefully and discern. Words offer a window to the heart, exposing the deepest intentions. James takes the same tree and fruit metaphor and says a bit more:

*Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh. Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But **the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.** [James 3:12-17]*

For James, the good fruits are just one item in a longer list of the attributes of Wisdom.²⁷ It is likely that James is thinking of good works as including both words

²⁴ John 4:35-38. Note that Paul sees himself similarly reaping harvest among the Gentiles, Romans 1:13. I suspect “harvesting” is a tricky image for those who feel abused by evangelical zeal, but welcoming people into community might be the more positive spin...

²⁵ Some thirty, sixty and a hundredfold...see the parable, Mark 4:3-9,ff.

²⁶ See also Matt 7:16-20.

²⁷ Wisdom, personified as a woman, is another long-standing biblical metaphor closely associated with Christ.

and deeds, since James' letter emphasizes the importance of both. But where James lists the attributes of Wisdom that include good fruits, Paul sees those attributes themselves as fruit:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. [Gal 5:22-23]

These two verses in the letter to the Galatians are often quoted because they are the only direct mention of “fruit of the Spirit” in the Bible. But there are certainly other lists reflecting the same attributes of spiritual life. For example:

I therefore ... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. [Eph 4:1-3]

And again writing to the Colossians:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. [Col 3:12-14]

It's worth noting that the metaphor has changed to clothing. But no one ever said that one metaphor would do, or that we couldn't wear fruit, at least spiritual fruit.

But, overall, these Pauline or pseudo-Pauline lists are pretty consistent. Just as the blood of the vine was love, here the core and unity of the fruit is love. That love expresses itself in various tangible ways – as joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, compassion, humility, and meekness.

The metaphor of fruit succeeds where it suggests that connecting intimately with the vine has organic outcomes in our lives. We can't help but be, speak, and act distinctively and in a genuinely “fruitful” way.

The metaphor suggests that the fruit is both individual and communal. We bear the fruit of a particular tree. Strictly speaking, we can't even “cultivate” this fruit. The gardener is busy doing that. Our challenge is to recognize – to discern – such fruit in ourselves and in others as a sure sign of Spirit at work.

If we had to judge by sheer frequency of repetition in the New Testament, there might be a set of Top Fruit. Four certainly stand out as frequently mentioned: *peace, joy, patience and gentleness*. All of these, suggests Paul, are nurtured and ripened

from love.²⁸

But who are we to judge the top four fruits? And who are we to judge others based on their fruit? “*Judge not, that ye be not judged,*” says Jesus.²⁹ But scriptures also call us to exercise spiritual discernment. Clarence Jordan offers the all-time best summary:

*Don't let this business of “judge not” throw you...He said, “By their fruits you shall know them. Judge their fruits.” Now, **he might not have made us a judge, but he made us a fruit inspector.***³⁰

- *How well are we doing as “fruit inspectors”? For ourselves? For our community?*
- *What do peace, joy, patience and gentleness look like? In our lives? In community?*
- *Which “fruit” seems to be in shortest supply? In your life? In your community? Which fruits are currently in season?*
- *How are “fruits of the Spirit” like Quaker testimonies? How do they differ?*

²⁸ Of these, “gentleness” strikes me as surprisingly neglected. We extoll peace, but how often gentleness?

²⁹ Matt 7:1 [KJV].

³⁰ Clarence Jordan, *The Substance of Faith*, 153.

5 The Body

St. Paul lived in the Roman Empire and traveled widely, spreading his newfound faith along trade routes that connected a sprawling network of cities. He interacted with many privileged and less privileged classes and championed a relatively inclusive community of faith that integrated “Jew, Greek, slave, free, male and female.”³¹ All this diversity created friction. Other apostles actively preached against Paul’s inclusive community, preferring stricter conformity.

Paul, as a Jew who wrote about spiritual fruits, doubtless knew the traditional image of the vine. So why are there no vines in his letters? Well, for one thing, it may have suggested uniformity – branches of one kind, neatly trimmed, bearing similar fruit. This is hardly Paul’s experience.

For another, the Hebrew heritage of the image would have played into the hands of opposing preachers who felt that all Christians should be practicing Jews. For them, the Vine was firmly rooted in one holy land and one holy tradition. Why would God chop at those roots?

So, instead of the vine, Paul adopted a new metaphor of *body*. Like the vine, the body is organic, a living thing. But unlike the vine, it is not rooted in one place or tradition. The “fruit” of the body arises not from sharing a common stock but from sharing a common *mind*.

Dealing with conflict and tension is one of Paul’s driving concerns... and may be one of our driving concerns today. The body offers a model of life arising out of dynamic tension. Each part of the body, argues Paul, bears unique *gifts* that contribute to the life of the whole. The Spirit does not want us to be alike, to conform, but to be transformed into a new whole.

Many people quote Paul’s famous line: *‘do not be conformed to this world,’*³² but few remember his advice about what such *non-conforming* might look like:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what the will of God— what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. [Rom 12:2-8]

Note the plural in the first sentence –you must “be transformed by the renewing of your minds [plural]” not “the renewing of you mind.” Our modern English doesn’t even retain a

³¹Gal 3:28

³²Rom 12:2

plural form of “you”,³³ so the plural may be very hard to discern – very hard for “ears to hear.” But, for Paul, there’s clearly an association between *non-conforming*, *transforming*, *discerning* and being members one of another – of being the plural you.

Paul reiterates these themes of the body, its many members and the diversity of their gifts on several occasions. However, the most extensively metaphor occurs in his letters to the church at Corinth. This is hardly surprising.

Corinth was a thriving center of commerce and trade, and the church there probably included a very diverse group with many different cultural and religious backgrounds and social standings. In addition, as a crossroads, the area was visited by multiple evangelists offering competing visions of the faith. The church struggled with contention and discord. Internal tensions threatened to tear the community apart.

Writing to Corinth, Paul offers a vision of *unity*. But it’s a strange and counter-intuitive type of unity. It’s a *unity dependent on diversity*. This vision challenges many imperial cultural norms of the Greek and Roman world and our world today – particularly dominance, strength, social order, honor and respect – in light of a newly revealed truth of *mutual interdependence*:

*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, **the body does not consist of one member but of many**. If the foot were to 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. And if the ear were to 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 the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. **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.”** On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. [1 Cor 12:12-26]*

Paul goes on to concede that there are some particularly helpful gifts which should be encouraged and cultivated – serving as apostles, prophets, teachers, performing deeds of power, healing, assistance, leadership, or speaking in foreign languages³⁴ – and even puts these gifts in

³³ Quakers may be partly to blame, having objected to the culture’s tendency to glorify privileged individual by using the plural “you” while consigning everyone else to the singular “thou.” They hoped for a different outcome.

³⁴ Okay, yes, “speaking in tongues” which Paul approves only if someone can translate.

a rank order. But then Paul pauses and reiterates that rank isn't the issue. The writing that follows is some of the most impassioned and beautiful in the Bible:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. [1 Cor 13:1-7]

We keep coming back to love. Love turned out to be the blood of the vine and the source of the fruit. That same blood flows through the spiritual body.

But, in the image of the body, Paul has given us a powerful metaphor, partly because it is so intimate and familiar. We know we are made up of specialized parts with amazing abilities. The parts themselves seem to have little understanding of how they relate, and yet the whole, together is capable of what no part could do alone. The mechanisms of coordination are complex and subtle. Many of the parts actively strive against one another. Literal tensions allows motion. Conflicting responses create a dynamic balance. Some actions of the body are driven by thought, but many of the most important are not, including the ones that make thought possible. No part would survive long without most of the others. Watching any toddler reminds us that taking a step is a miraculous affair.

Think of the faith community as a body. What parts of your community are like skin – deciding what to let in and what to let out, keeping us together but also separate from the environment? What parts are like bones, providing structure and anchoring for all the other pieces? What parts think? What parts enable thinking? How does the body of the community learn to walk?

- *In your experience, is non-conforming to this world related to being part of a body?*
- *When, in our community, have we heard “the hand” feeling it did not belong or “the eye” deciding it has no need of “the hand”? What do we do when this occurs?*
- *Are we tempted to segregate similar parts of the body together? How does this help or hinder the work of the body?*
- *How do we discern unity, without demanding uniformity? How do bodies do it? How do we encourage a variety of gifts, with love?*

6 The Mind

Later writers, including Paul's successors, would rewrite the image of the body, emphasizing that Christ is the "head" of the church and the church body should organize as a hierarchy. The head commands from up top and as in the old spiritual, "the neck bone connected to the head bone" all the way down to the toe bones. It leaves us a bit skeletal, but well organized.

But let's read Paul's early writings for a somewhat different view. For Paul, Christ is not so much the *head* as the *mind*. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," writes Paul to the church in Philippi.³⁵ Note that "you" is plural again. Let the same mind be in you [plural] as in Christ Jesus. It's not something you [singular] do or possess; it's something that happens collectively in community.

We are, perhaps, more familiar with the Gospel of Matthew's way of describing this presence in the midst: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."³⁶ Christ is in the community; there is no "midst" with only one.

To understand what Paul means by the mind of Christ, we need to delve deeper into his letter to the Philippians. It is likely Paul's earliest surviving letter and the earliest writing preserved in the New Testament. In the second chapter, Paul lapses from advice to the community into a kind of hymn about love. He reflects about the mind that animates the body of the faithful:

*Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. **Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,***

*who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. [Phil 2:2-8]*

For Paul, the community embodies this "mind of Christ." And that mind is love. As a result, like the image of the vine, love flows through the organism unifying and animating the body. Love expresses itself as fruits – actions, words and ways of being. Love knits the diversity of people and their gifts into a unity that is both dynamic and far from uniform.

Imagining a mind animating the communal body may help clarify how to organize our

³⁵ Phil 2:5.

³⁶ Matt 18:20

own communities. Mind is not brain. It is not even a “member” of the body. Members of our community may bring the gift of rational thought or leadership (Paul included this as a gift), but mind is intention. And intention integrates thought, emotion and action to fulfil a purpose. It calls muscles, brain, heart, lungs, and circulatory system into action to take that first step.

If we are all members of one communal body, what is the relation of committees to the community? Is a committee a place for all the hands to gather, or all the eyes? I’m afraid a committee of eyes will be tempted to accuse the committee of hands of not seeing, and the committee of hands will accuse the committee of eyes of not doing. And I suspect neither committee will remember to breathe.

Our community cannot consist of segregated body parts. If it does, business meeting will most likely be stuck trying to bolt and stitch those parts together, Frankenstein-like, into something resembling one body...and with about as much fear of the result.

No, each committee reflects an intention that involves the whole body. Building and Grounds reflects an intention to be mindful of the physical needs of our spiritual body. Peace and Social Concerns might be our intention to labor outside, learning to serve skillfully, strengthening the spiritual muscles, while avoiding excess and fatigue. Education Committees might mind our spiritual nutrition, and Worship and Ministry would certainly check our pulse and remind us to breathe – that is, to worship.

If we saw ourselves this way, growing up like a toddler, adding more and more complex abilities that engage our new body in breathing, eating, work and play, how would we run our Meeting? Would we know when to take up an intention and when to lay it down? Would we find the eyes, hands, feet and heart for each new work or dance?

One final thought: If the metaphor fits – if we know that the body of our community is animated by the mind of love, then what do we do when we are out of love – that is, out of our mind?

- *What mind is in us? How do we know?*
- *What intention do our committees express and facilitate across the body?*
- *When, as a community, have we been “out of our mind”? What happened?*
- *Clarence Jordan says “it is not difficult to discover the mind of Christ, but I find it difficult to implement the mind of Christ.”³⁷ What would you say to Clarence?*

³⁷³⁷ Clarence Jordan, *The Substance of Faith*, 115.

7 The Ecosystem

Metaphors are not truth any more than light is a wave or Jesus is the Light. Yet metaphors serve as models, and as such they are helpful in our experiments with light or experiments with Light.

Models help us understand our experience. They suggest new possibilities by analogy. They can also seriously blind and mislead us. Too easily we decide that the kingdom of God is in fact a kingdom and start arming its parapets. Too easily we demand to stay unmovably rooted like a vine in our holy ground, or we blithely uproot ourselves as a body and loose our grounding. In short, metaphors have consequences.

But, if you think about it, metaphors offer a spiritual training ground. They help us practice discernment. ‘do we have ears?’ they ask, “Have we learned to hear?”

The image of the vine extended and challenged older metaphors about vines and gardens, asking us to decide which is the “true” vine and which is not. The list of “fruits” offered practical clues to practice discerning spiritual health from disease. In the Letter to the Romans, Paul called for non-conforming, transforming, discerning... and then immediately switched to the metaphor of the body. All we need, he says, is to live in the plural you and be in the right mind. That is a model for a dynamic and diverse community to help it find its way.

And we need models to find our way, to discern the light from dark, especially when the world seems nothing but shadow. Not every night offers moonlight through our bedroom window. Carrie Newcomer sings of sitting on her porch at 4:00 a.m., “the last dregs of evening”:

*Well well well – it’s so hard to tell
There’s a line between the light and dark
Between heaven and hell*

*Well well well well well well
It’s not easy to see
What’s out there on my left or right
Or what’s right in front of me³⁸*

And she gives us yet another metaphor about the challenges of discernment. Having a mental model, at least of the porch, keeps us from pitching off the steps in our darkest hours. Body, mind, vine, fruit – What metaphors might help us thrive, or at least not pitch off the porch?

Given life on earth today, one thought occurs to me from an ecological and systems science perspective. As we learn more about organic systems, we find interdependence at all levels – from cells to ecosystems. Might we imagine our spiritual life in terms on this scale? Just as the hand needs the eye, might all bodies of faith form some larger spiritual ecosystem? New or renewed metaphors could help us root in our world and in our faith community illuminating our lives as embodied spiritual beings.

³⁸ Carrie Newcomer, “A Map of Shadows,” from *The Geography of Light* audio CD (Philo, 2008).

The world is full of unity in diversity; Paul just glimpsed darkly what we now begin to see in full. The gardener's vineyard is extraordinarily beautiful, complex and alive, and the gardener is still sweating over its care. If we look to organic models, perhaps it would help reconnect the spiritual and planetary ecosystems in which we live and move and have our being.³⁹

“The ecosystem of God is like ...” what?

Your turn.

Those who have ears, let them hear!

³⁹ Acts 17:28.