

Unity

TEXT: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on April 26, 2026

As we continue to examine our own personal beliefs about God, ourselves, and our world, we began last week tossing in what I'm calling "pillars of belief," biblical themes and principles that are easier to connect to how we live out our daily lives than more ethereal beliefs like the beliefs in Jesus' second coming and resurrection with which we began.

Last week, the first pillar we looked at was the Ten Commandments, and this week we'll look at unity. If you were raised in a church or have attended church for any length of time you will have encountered the metaphor of the Body of Christ as Paul uses it in the passage Neil just read from 1 Corinthians and a similar passage in Romans 12.

The Body of Christ metaphor is a great way to get at the core concept, since we all have bodies and can easily recognize that both our noses and our feet are very much needed for full bodily function, even though they don't resemble each other at all, and do totally different things in totally different ways.

With that metaphor we can more easily grasp that unity doesn't mean sameness. In fact, Paul goes out of his way to point out how ridiculous it would be for the whole body to be an ear or if the eye went rogue and proclaimed that the body's functioning would be just as good if we lopped off our hands.

And then, both here and in Romans, Paul points out that when you expand that out to the spiritual concept of different people being part of the Body of Christ, the diversity of body parts necessary for a physical body become different spiritual gifts and callings, all directed from the spiritual head, which in this case is Christ. Paul is not generally known for the clarity of his writing; but in this it's easy to understand both the concept and the application.

We can certainly see this play out in any local church, and how well any individual church is able to function is directly linked to the diversity of gifts, voices, and perspectives in the congregation, our willingness to put them to use for the body, and the willingness of leaders at all levels to encourage and train those willing to use their gifts for ministry in the church.

I believe we can take that further, out to the ministry of groups of churches. When we say the Apostles' Creed, a problematic line for many Protestants is, "I believe in the holy catholic church." It is so widely misunderstood that when the creed appears in our hymnals, there's a little asterisk next to the word "catholic," pointing out that "catholic" with a small "c" simply means "universal." It does not mean the Roman Catholic Church. It's the affirmation that all Christians in all churches are part of that same Body of Christ that Paul was talking about.

If we took that seriously, Christianity as a whole would look very different. I believe different denominations fill different roles in that small "c" catholic body of Christ, each raising up different sets of important issues for the whole body to consider and remember. And at all levels of the Body of Christ, the functioning of any one part affects the health and well-being of the whole. If one part is diseased, the whole body is affected and it's on all of us to help all parts of the body be as healthy as possible. It would be ridiculous for the lungs to say, "No worries, I'm perfectly fine while ignoring that the liver is riddled with cancer." Like it or not, every church of every kind is connected to every other through the One we all look to as our head.

But we're still within the innermost layers of what I believe the Bible is talking about in suggesting that we are all one body. What if each of the world's major religions served an important function in God's design for

humanity? As Christians lose their faith when confronted with extreme suffering, despite the pretty obvious image of Jesus dying on a cross at the center of our faith, Buddhists come sit by us, pull out a copy of their Four Noble Truths and gently say, “I know, but have you considered that ‘All life is suffering?’ that it’s an inherent part of existence and that our cravings are at the root of it?”

I have a Christian friend who converted to Islam and a clergy colleague in the UCC now in the years-long process of converting to Judaism because they gain so much spiritually in traditions that are highly focused on the day-to-day practice of their beliefs. Both Islam and Judaism honor Jesus as a prophet. I know several Hindus who are quite comfortable in Christian churches because their Hindu faith focuses on the immeasurable number of forms that the divine can take on earth, and Jesus is a very inspiring form for them.

But we’re still not done. Prepare for the launch into hyperdrive.

A little over a week ago, I was standing by the stairs up to my deck in NH chatting with a worker who was trying to solve an issue on the ground under my deck. I looked down at one of the pieces of gray slate that was valiantly trying to hold up the deck stairs, and noticed that the surface of the slate was moving. Teeny-tiny little bugs. Thousands upon thousands of them.

I thought at first they were those microscopic ants, which can swarm like that. But then I noticed that they were all blue—the color quite obvious with so many together that you could barely see the stone. So naturally I called the worker over and said, “Are you also an entomologist by chance? Do you know what these bugs are?”

He didn’t miss a beat. “Snow fleas,” he said. “Good little guys that live in leaf litter and help the soil. They tolerate cold temperatures and you see them when the snow thaws. They’re dying now. That’s what they’re doing.”

I’d never heard of snow fleas in my life. So, naturally, once he left, I looked them up. As it turns out, they aren’t actually fleas and are not even categorized as insects. They are one of over 9,000 species of hexapods called springtails. They are about 1/16th of an inch long, but still manage to cram 32 eyes into that space.

Springtails are active year-round all across North America; they just get noticed more in winter because the snow flea variety of springtail can survive in sub-zero temperatures, when most others can’t. That lets more people see them against the snow and gives them a whole season to do their little jobs without the predators that take them in the warmer seasons.

Springtails don’t bite, don’t eat crops, don’t spread disease to either humans or animals. They can’t fly, but are pretty fair jumpers—springing from their tails. And, like everything else on God’s green earth, snow fleas, like all springtails, have a critical job to play. They are “decomposers.” This is from an article on snow fleas on Yellowstone.org.

“As decomposers, Snow fleas consume leaf litter, fungi, algae, and bacteria, breaking down organic matter and recycling nutrients through the ecosystem. They also distribute spores from the various types of fungi that make up a healthy soil community. Their movements, digestive tracks, and even decomposing bodies provide this important ecosystem function. ...

This recycling and redistribution of nutrients occurs year-round, generally with Snow fleas and other springtails hidden beneath the leaf litter and humus that covers forest floors. ... As the snow melts, Snow fleas will return to the leaf litter to lay eggs and complete another season maintaining healthy soil.”

When the worker under my deck told me the snow fleas were dying, that was because it was the time of year that they lay their eggs in the leaf litter, which is plentiful in my yard there, and, with that job complete, they will embark on a final march to sacrifice their lives. And now for a message from this sermon’s Easter season sponsor, Earth Day.

As you may know, nitrogen is one of the three most important elements for plant growth (the other two being phosphorus and potassium), and after a year of chowing down on organic matter, the tiny bodies of snow fleas are full of nitrogen.

You may also know that the vast majority of plant species, everywhere on earth, are connected, sustained, and fed from below by vast fungal networks that connect their roots underground and help pull the necessary nutrients from the soil into the plant roots, passing extra along the fungal network for others.

As the fungi do their job, if the plants they are supporting are running low on nitrogen, they release pheromones that attract springtails like snow fleas and others. And those springtails swarm by the millions to the fungi that have summoned them.

When the springtails arrive, the fungi inject them with a toxin and the springtails die, allowing the fungal networks below to extract all the yummy nitrogen from the bodies of the springtails to replenish the plant life in their networks.

Later in the spring, the eggs those sacrificial springtails laid in the leaf litter will hatch and start the year's work of composting organic matter and enriching the soil until their bodies are full of nitrogen and then giving it all up to the fungi for the plants all over again.

Unless, of course, you have blown it all away with a leaf blower, in which case billions of springtails have died in vain; and next year, when the fungi send out their siren song, no one will answer, and the plants will not receive the nitrogen they need, and the soil will deteriorate, and crops will suffer, and the quality of our food will deteriorate, and the plant diseases the springtails prevented will spread, and so farmers will use more pesticides, which will kill the bees and other insects that feed the birds, whose populations will then decline.

North American bird populations have decreased by nearly 3 billion since 1970 and that drop is accelerating. When studied by researchers at Ohio State University, the best predictor of accelerated decline in birds was agricultural intensity, especially the use of fertilizer and pesticides and the overall area taken for cropland. A European study in 2023 found the same correlation, not just for birds but for insects and all species who feed on either.

With no birds to disperse seeds, plant species are lost and predators who feed on birds also see their numbers decline until there is not enough genetic diversity to support them and they become extinct. That leaves those of us who are left with greater risk of wildfires, disease, drought, extreme weather, and polluted air and water. Which is pretty much where we are right now in the grand scheme of things. All of that is already happening.

Seeing other Christians as being one with us in the Body of Christ is just the tiny tip of a vast iceberg. I believe we are one with all of it—the whole divine enterprise of Creation—and what is done to any of it is done to all of it.

The name Adam in Hebrew literally means “red earth.” The truth of the stories of Creation in Genesis are expressed in the words from Genesis that we hear every Lent, “Dust you are and to dust you shall return.” In the biblical telling, we are, quite literally, made of earth.

Springtails have been on this earth far longer than humans. They have been living and composting and sacrificing their nitrogen-filled bodies to fungi since the Devonian period 400 million years ago, at the end of what we call The Age of Fishes, when life first crawled out of the water onto dry land.

Our ability to live on this garden planet was made possible because God made springtails like the snow flea first to help tend the plants that then filled our atmosphere with enough oxygen for animal life and, eventually, for ours.

Whether you believe that God hand-crafted every bit of life on earth individually or just created a master single-cell organism and tossed it into the primordial soup to see what came of it, doesn't really matter to me.

But what seems plain to me, and what I believe, is that God first designed an interdependent ecology that we now call Earth, and then, in one way or another, populated it with everything needed to keep that system running forever.

In Genesis, the first humans were told that their vocation was to serve and protect all of God's creation and, above all, to respect the limits that God placed on their methods. By Genesis 3 we were off the rails, unable to keep even the one tiny limit God asked. Just don't eat this one fruit on this one tree. Literally everything else in the Garden is available to you. Just not that one.

When we proved unable to abide by even that one limit, the "forever" part of the project was off the table. At least for us. The snow fleas and other springtails may well outlast us, as they have outlasted various extinctions, including the dinosaurs and every hominid species before homo sapiens.

We still have a chance to save ourselves, but to do so, we have got to stop strutting around the planet like we own the place and see ourselves not just as one with other Christians in the Body of Christ, or even as one with all of humanity, as important as that is. I believe what it will take to get us safely through is to recognize that human beings are one of many necessary parts of the one Body of Earth—for from it we were made and to it we will return.

And if we don't, God's amazing design will still allow the truth of Easter to continue to be proclaimed by the snow fleas and other springtails, who spend their lives composting the soil to fill themselves with nutrients needed by others, and then give up their own bodies to be pulled up through the roots to the plants above, so that others may live again. Amen.