

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • MAY 4, 2019
ROCHEPORT BLUEGRASS SABBATH

The Scripture

Isaiah 54:3

*You're going to need lots of **elbow** room for your growing family. You're going to take over whole nations; you're going to resettle abandoned cities. (from The Message translation)*

The Message

Elbow Room

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When we minister types go to contemplating what message to bring to a congregation on any given occasion, we listen. We listen in the world, to the people, to the culture, to the news, to the Holy Spirit, and we begin to be amazed at how a message will take shape. Well, these last few weeks have been unique for me holding this night in my heart. I'm not sure if this landing place is a curious fixation or a sacred prompt but I do believe that God works good for all who love God. So, I present to you tonight's message:

Elbow Room

It started when I walked into the high school to return the bust of an armless mannequin, I borrowed from costumes for our church garage sale display. As I moved through a lounging hall, I heard a student say, "Don't touch my wenis."

Well I knew right away they weren't talking about my mannequin because she was armless and a "wenis" is slang for the loose skin around the elbow. Well, all the kids were laughing because well, it's high school and someone just said, "Don't touch my wenis."

Then on Sunday past, we gathered to sing the music for tonight's service. One of the songs we just sang, positioned to set up the sermon is "Fifty Miles of Elbow Room." So, fixation, listening spirit, or desperation, here we are.

Elbow Room.

The song sings of being sometimes cramped and crowded here on earth and longing for elbow room that will be found in ample manner with 50-miles to the left and to the right once the gates of heaven swing open for us in welcome. Believing that the gates of heaven are all around us, and we walked through one tonight, I'm wondering where is the opportunity for sacred elbowroom in the here and now?

If it is desirous in heaven, then it must be within our reach now. It also happens to be the week that we are holding the teachings of the Body of Christ in our classes for our baptismal candidates.

In shaping the message and thoughts for them, I got out the old game of Operation and asked them to name the examples in their own lives they might have for the Adam's apple or the lump in their throat, and they named things that scared them. (Gulp)

What about for their hearts? They named things they love and care about deeply. What about the funny bone? They mentioned things that make them laugh. So, I'll ask you like I asked them, "How do we need these things, and how do they work together to make us one body or a whole person?"

We know the Scripture, "*The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' or again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'*" (I Corinthians 12:21)

On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable. The parts that we think are less honorable, we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment...the parts of the body should have equal concern for each other.

I have no need of you? No, for each of us, each one serves an essential role in the whole body of Christ. We get Paul's metaphor.

As church and people, as human and divine creation, we are created to walk this earth but once and ours is the mission to bring love. Each one of us is uniquely made with gifts, ideas, promptings, imaginings, goals, visions, and hopes for the mission of God in the world, which is simply and complexly – Love.

Now, of course, Paul was talking to the people of Corinth who were so diverse and inclusive. This was unique in the ancient community, especially while holding one another in high regard with all the differences.

Two ports of the Isthmus of Corinth made this the reality. But this city was not so different from our own today of international and intercultural blending.

The preaching and the practice were to value one another. To truly value something is to appreciate it, to see its beauty, its purpose, and its expression with grace and uniqueness. If, at the end of a few minutes, we can do this with the elbow, then we can be encouraged to do it in other ways. too.

Here's the big idea: If we can isolate the importance of the elbow, then we can begin to understand that all of us really matter in the body of Christ. Ours is to look, discover, and value one another.

And under today's magnifying glass is the elbow – or what my operation game calls, the funny bone.

We all have experienced the wonder of why it would be called this when we slam it into something and do anything but laugh in the agony of its vulnerability.

1. So, lesson number one of the elbow can send shock waves through our body and stop us in our tracks, at least momentarily. This lesson is that amid a quick turn or a harried day, one wrong contact can cause us to think of only that pain and for a moment forget everything else. Pain is a good teacher. Next time we hit the elbow, think about what else was on our minds and consider it a reset button. Let's attach this to, *"Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God," (Colossians 3:2).*
2. The beauty of the elbow is seen when it is linked to another elbow. As if walking down an aisle in covenant making or being honored with an escort. These gestures are single minded. I'm going where you are going, and we have a common intention. Linking elbows is like the song, *"We will walk with each other; we will walk side by side, and we'll guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride. And they'll know we are Christians by our love."*

There is one body, and one Spirit, even as you are called in one hope of your calling," (Ephesians 4:4).

3. What about when the elbow is used as the cradle for holding a baby? When we have this opportunity, it is to know all as the children of God. The vulnerable, the small, the weak, and in this tenderness of holding, let the elbow remind us of our opportunity and charge and awe.

"You formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made," (Psalm 139:13-16).

4. What about the elbowing of another person to draw their attention to something they might be missing?

“Come and see what God has done; God is awesome in His mighty deeds toward the children of humankind,” (Psalm 55:5).

“Look up and see: Who created these things? God brings out the starry host by number, calling all of them by name. Because God is great in power and strength, not one of them is missing,” (Isaiah 40:26-31).

5. What about elbowing another person to get them to stop misbehaving? I love this word. It tells the power of song as a reminder. Like, “Be careful little eyes what you see, feet where you go, tongue, what you say.” Do you remember this ditty?

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teach and admonish one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs and sing with grace in your hearts to God,” (Colossians 3:16).

6. What about the helping of a feeble or unsteady one by coming in under the elbow for support. Doing this gently and unobtrusively so as not to draw attention to weakness like God does for us.

“For I am the Lord your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you; “Do not fear, I will help you,” (Isaiah 41:13)

7. What about elbow grease, the idiom for working hard at manual labor; an expression of putting your strength to the task.

“Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense,” (Proverbs 12:11)

8. Throwing the elbows, getting someone out of our way. Not usually too scriptural, sort of self-serving and aggressive. Maybe when Jesus said to Peter in Matthew 16:23, “Get behind me Satan, you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

Who knew that the elbow had so much to teach us? Next month, maybe we'll hear the promptings to isolate another metaphorical or actual part of the body. Or maybe not.

What does it mean to have elbow room? Elbow room means freedom to do what you want: “The management gave the new director plenty of elbow room.”

Space to move around: Mobility physically or theoretically – “*We were squashed in; very little elbow room.*” Space and freedom: That’s what God gives to us in our free will. Room to do what you want. Isn’t this the essence of being fully human and yet fully divine?

God has given us a sacred, immortal spirit and a fragile, terminal human body. We don’t want to be bound and crowded so as to be immobile.

“Fifty-miles of Elbow Room,” sings of the freedom to move in and around as the body of Christ. What we are to do in this body is learn the transcendent ways of love that are so big that the body cannot contain them. Today the elbow is our teacher for all of this. Elbow room is our goal, to not miss the teaching moments of shock, covenant, inattention, tenderness, redirection, pause.

9. Cross your arms across your chest, this could be a gesture of pause, skepticism, rest. Body language study would say it closes us off, but not always.

The cue is in the chin placement; up high, disapproving, or defensive, chin tucked inward, could signal subservient, shame or a sort of hug. Sometimes, maybe today we can say that this gesture is to simply find and hold our elbows, to honor them to thank them as our teachers.

Oh, Body of Christ, today we lift the elbow. Amen.