

“Sharing the Load”

First Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

12For 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. 13For 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. 14Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15If 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. 16And 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. 17If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 21The 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.” 22On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; 24whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:27-31a

27Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31But strive for the greater gifts.

What you are about to hear is the entirely fictional account of two life-long Presbyterians – Tim and Nancy – and how their lives were unintentionally intertwined. Any resemblance to actual persons is completely coincidental.

Nancy is a mail carrier: a single, Presbyterian mail carrier *and*, she would add, an avid gardener. Nancy loves her job. It is the perfect combination of routine, exercise, fresh air, solitude, and interaction with people. She likes the challenge of organization; she likes to push herself to be quick but accurate. But by far, her favorite part of every day is delivering mail to a particular elderly widow by the name of Mrs. Kotter. Mrs. Kotter stands on her enclosed porch and watches for Nancy walking down the sidewalk. And every day, Mrs. Kotter swings open her screen door and greets her with, “Hello, my dear! And what do you have for me today?” It feels to Nancy like the way delivering mail *ought* to feel: connectional. If she is ever running behind, Mrs. Kotter says she worries, so whenever Nancy knows she will be on vacation, she gives Mrs. Kotter fair warning. What is so special about Mrs. Kotter is the subtle way she makes Nancy feel known and cared for; when Nancy delivers her mail, Nancy knows that what she does and who she is matters.

When Nancy joined Lord of Life Presbyterian Church two years ago, she was hoping to feel some of that kind of community. But within a few weeks of joining, Nancy somehow became anonymous: the unassuming woman who sits on the far left, third row from the back. At first, she convinced herself that she liked this anonymity; by the time Sunday came around, she was “peopled out.” She worked five and a half days a week delivering mail, always having to know

names and be friendly, and she figured that it was just easier to shut down and become invisible while in church. Once, when Nancy heard the passage about the church being a body with different parts, she started daydreaming of herself as a toenail. The pastor was speaking about each part being indispensable, but if Nancy were to fall off the toe for some reason, she doubted that anyone would notice. It was then that she started to be bothered by the fact that not many people besides the pastor and a couple of outgoing greeters knew anything about her.

Tim is a physical therapist. He works five days a week, in a rehab facility. Tim has been a member at Lord of Life Presbyterian Church for five years. Tim, unlike Nancy, is involved in *many things* at the church, and he has been involved even before he was a member. He belts out the tenor line in the choir and solos regularly. He leads recreation at VBS, thinking through sometimes a year in advance about some of the games he will do. He cleans up and sets up for church dinners. He coordinates taking care of Lord of Life's small co-op vegetable garden, something he was roped into after mowing the church lawn a couple of times. Tim has already served on two committees, and he is a leader of a small group Bible Study. Most of the time, serving is a thrill for Tim. He loves to feel needed, and as he walks into the church, passing by the garden, and then walks through the halls and knows many of the kids and looks out from the choir loft and knows most of the adults, he feels like he belongs. When he heard that same sermon about the body, he thought of himself as the right index finger, offering much-needed leadership. And boy, would people notice if he were gone. Sometimes, though, Tim would sign up to attend or help with events that he didn't really want to do. On more than one occasion, he signed up out of obligation, because if he didn't do it, no one else would.

Lately, Tim has been noticing a new impatience. After the last church dinner, while lugging three folding chairs toward the rack, he had to walk around two people who were deep in conversation and *not helping*. "Excuse me," he said, and he noticed that his jaw was clenched. And before a recent Bible Study, knowing he was going to be gone, he had asked one of the small group members – Patricia – to facilitate, but she had decided to scrap the lesson and told everyone just to meet at Starbucks instead to shoot the breeze. Tim was disappointed and a bit annoyed. He couldn't figure out why everyone had to be so *dependent* on him.

One night he got a phone call from another active member in the church, reminding him that he had signed up for the Spiritual Renewal retreat at a local monastery. The weekend was structured around significant periods of silence. "Are you *sure* I signed up?" Tim asked. He hated silence, so he couldn't imagine having put his name down; maybe he had thought it was for something else. The woman said that she was so excited to have Tim there and that not many other people were planning to come. So Tim wrote down the details and penned it in on his calendar. After saying, "No problem -- I'm really looking forward to it," he hung up. Three weeks later, there he sat in his room at the monastery. At first, he felt stuck and frustrated at himself that he had come to a retreat he had no interest in. But in the silence, Tim was able to breathe easier and fuller than he had in years. He wrote down in his journal on the last day, "Drop two commitments. Month-long moratorium on signing up even for small things."

Tim told the church grounds coordinator that he was very sorry, but that he could no longer coordinate the church's co-op garden. The grounds committee put a notice in the church bulletin the following Sunday, asking if anyone would step forward to coordinate that. Tim also decided that it was time for someone else to take over his small group. He still believed that Patricia showed promise for being a leader; Tim had simply not set her up for success. He talked to Patricia about being an "apprentice" leader with him for a while with the goal of him taking over the group in a month; the first week, she would lead the prayers, the next week, she would write

and ask the discussion questions, and so on, until she was comfortable enough to lead the whole thing.

Now let's get back to Nancy, our other member in the spotlight at Lord of Life. An unexpected and unwelcome turn of events was soon to make space for something new in her life as well.

One evening after an extra long day on her route, Nancy started feeling severe stomach pains. She called her neighbor, who drove her to the emergency room. It was appendicitis. Her neighbor asked Nancy if she could call anyone. Only because Nancy thought she was dying did she say, "Call Lord of Life Presbyterian Church." The next day, a deacon from Lord of Life stopped by her room, prayed with her, and asked if some meals delivered to her home might be helpful. She was shocked that someone from church would do this for her and said, "I suppose a couple of meals would help after I go home."

Two people from the church brought her meals when she was recovering in front of the TV, and she invited them to sit down for a minute. One of them, MaryLou, said, "I don't know if I've seen you before, dear. What service do you attend?" Nancy said that went to the late service and sat in the back, on the left. "Well, the next time I see you in church, I'll have to come over and say hi, dear. I sit on the right-hand side."

And do you know something? When Nancy was back in church, MaryLou did come and say hello, and she introduced Nancy to her daughter, who was Nancy's age. Her name was Patricia, and she invited Nancy to join the small group she was soon to be facilitating. Nancy said yes. Little did she know that she would soon make a lifelong circle of friends.

Energized by these connections, Nancy decided to respond to the notice in the church bulletin about overseeing the church's co-op garden. She would get to be outside, be organized, and work with people. She had wanted to get involved in the church garden, but there had never been an opening. Nancy hoped to expand the garden and start giving a tenth of their vegetables to a local homeless shelter.

Tim and Nancy still don't know each other's names. They haven't yet discovered how their lives in the church are intertwined and the extent to which they needed each other. This may not come to them for a while.

-Betsey Moe
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