



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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## Teaching Puppy Dogs to Bite

*Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, January 27, 2013*

*The Third Sunday after the Epiphany*

*Based on I Corinthians 12:12-31a and Luke 4:14-21*

This morning's Gospel text is a type of inaugural address for Jesus. Reading the Scripture in his home synagogue in Nazareth, he proclaimed that he had been anointed to bring good news to the poor, sent to proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

It is important to remember that these words are a quote from the prophet Isaiah and seemed to be what was remembered about this inaugural address. Indeed, proclaiming the healing of the chronically disabled and the re-enfranchisement of the economically and politically disenfranchised is always a powerful message. In beginning his inaugural address this way Jesus establishes himself, his ministry—and by extension, the Church—on the side of the poor, the oppressed, and the disenfranchised. It is important to remember that wherever people have advocated for the poor, whether Nazareth, Seneca Falls, Selma, or Stonewall, the response has been swift and critical. Advocacy involves, in the paraphrased words of Abraham Lincoln, a clear understanding of where one is and where one wants to go and that usually involves overturning the social order. Advocates for change are often labeled troublemakers, disrupters of the social order.

"Well-behaved women rarely make history" is the message on a sign found in the Supreme Court Chambers of Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor, according to the *New York Times* book review of her recently published autobiography. This concept, that well-behaved women rarely make history, has informed and challenged my thinking and practice over the last few weeks. Indeed, people who are disrupters of the established social order are rarely described as well-behaved.

Certainly as I prepared for today's sermon I have pondered what these words might have meant to Paul writing a letter to the Corinthian Church. He depicts the Christian community as the Body of Christ and leaves us with one of the enduring images of the Church that is elegant on so many levels. It is interesting to think of the Church as a unified community that does not practice uniformity. It seems that even at this early time the Church was already a diverse group that included everyone from Jews to Greeks. There also seems to have been economic diversity, from slaves to free people.

It should not surprise us that, as in any diverse human community, the Church in Corinth seems to have been in conflict. It seems to have been a community where some people valued some members of the community over other members. It also seems that perhaps some members felt excluded and other members even thought about excluding other members. This type of conflict, which we experience in the Church today, is not new. But it does not seem to have worried Paul. He did not try to stifle the conflict. He did not come down on one side or the other or tell people who was right or wrong. Instead, he used this image of the Church as the Body of Christ, distinct members working together.

Paul did not have a modern understanding of the workings of the human body. And yet the image works even better today. People who understand more about human bodies than I do tell me about the body's intricate web of feedback mechanisms. Even

the most basic understanding of the dynamic and responsive workings of the other self-regulating mechanisms in the body, neurons, neurotransmitters, and hormones, helps to illustrate how the Church the Body of Christ can form an interdependent web of stimulus and response and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances.

One might imagine that Judge Sotomayor has no problem confronting others and calling them to account. On the other hand one can imagine that she did not come by that skill easily—or she might not have needed a sign in her office to remind herself that “well-behaved women rarely make history.” Now I understand gender roles and some of the ways in which women have been socialized differently from men. That confronting others and calling them to account does not always work out well for women. I also know that men are becoming socialized to be nice and non-confrontational too. We have lost the ability to constructively engage in honest confrontation and difficult conversations while continuing in the same body. And yet none of us is perfect and we all need to learn from our mistakes and improve. The only way we can learn from our mistakes is if someone points them out, we try something new and learn from those mistakes. We need to be ready to transgress society's expectations and stir up a little conflict if we wish to make history with our proclamation of the faith of Jesus. And that is what we, as a Church, are called to do by Jesus in his inaugural address.

I have been pondering these readings and the recent lack of civility in our political culture, of winner take all: I must have my way, and if not I will walk away. At the same time I think about the niceness into which we are being socialized not to confront each other. How do these two hold together? By attempting to become nicer have we in the end become less civil? That is, we build up frustrations little and big and don't tell the other person until we tell them we must destroy them. They must depart from us rather than engage in an ordinary give-and-take of conversation and confrontation.

People who know far more about canine behavior than I do tell me that puppy dogs benefit from spending more time with their litter mates than our desire to adopt cute new born puppies allows. In fact, I am told that if puppies are not kept in their litter they should spend lots of time with other puppies so that they can learn to bite appropriately. Yes, you heard me correctly—puppies need to be taught to bite. For you see, in the process of all that puppy rough-housing they learn what it is to bite and to be bitten. They also have an opportunity to get the urge to bite out of their systems. And use their bite appropriately.

Ordinary confrontation and conversation is for us human beings an opportunity to learn to bite appropriately. Not to rip each other apart but to say “ouch” if hurt; and if that way of saying ouch was a little too hard, we will get bitten back. And we can learn and grow into a community that will not put down or discourage each other, into a community that can have confrontation without combat, collaboration without competition, and community-building rather than conquest. We can grow into a body with self-correcting mechanisms for feedback and sharing that will strengthen us for the really hard work of proclaiming Good News to the poor.

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