

Life Sunday Sermon 2021

1 Corinthians 12:12-26 “From Invisible to Indispensable”

Rev. Michael W. Salemink, Executive Director of Mission and Ministry, Lutherans For Life
lutheransforlife.org

So, you have these two tiny organs in your ears. Sort of a sixth sense. The utricle senses your head’s horizontal motion, and the saccule detects its vertical movement. They live inside the mystical semicircular canals of the vestibular labyrinth. The magic happens using otoliths—literally ear stones—microscopic crystals of calcium carbonate, the stuff that makes up chalk, stalagmites, seashells, and Tums. Curious, because when the otoliths act up, you can get quite queasy. When your cranium moves, the otoliths lag a little behind for a minute and tickle miniature hairs. Your brain interprets these signals as a shift in position and compares the input from both ears with the data from your eyes to define direction and orientation. Experts call it proprioception or kinesthesia, the body’s awareness of its alignment in space.

Now sometimes one of the itty-bitty otolith particles strays from its usual location. The ear tells the brain tilts and twirls are taking place that the eyes contradict. Specialists have designated this condition as benign paroxysmal positional vertigo, but lay people like you and me label it BPPV. It can cause nystagmus, an involuntary wobbling of your eyeballs as they try to track the imaginary travel. It’ll mess with your balance—you’ll feel dizzy, maybe fall down—and it’ll make you throw up. The whole body from head to heel either moves fluidly or goes haywire thanks to a single speck of dust. One recalls the way St. James appraises the tongue in his Epistle: how little a rudder directs what a large ship and how great a forest gets set ablaze by such a small spark.

One might also recall St. Paul’s Corinthian Epistle. Our text for today diagnoses them with becoming disoriented to their invisibles. They’re mistaking invisible for unvaluable. Only they’ve not misplaced particles but people. First chapter, the so-called Paul followers are overlooking the Apollos folks, and the Cephas people go unnoticed by the Christ crowd. Fifth

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one, a fellow’s lust leads him to perceive his stepmother as his mistress. Chapter seven, one saint sues another, not seeing past plaintiff or defendant to the brother or sister before them. In nine, parishioners view pastor as slave labor and not paid professional. By the eleventh chapter, they focus only on the food of the Holy Communion and forget the main course of fellowship. They’ve closed their eyes to how Christ Himself became stumbling block when He went ignored by the sign-demanding Jews and the wisdom-seeking Greeks. One wonders whether they consider invisibility a shortcoming instead of a superpower.

And the fritzzy vision is dizzying and sickening the Corinthian Christians. “That is why many of you are weak and ill and some have died” (11:30). Eye versus ear ends up not just crazy but downright dangerous! A dog dumbly chasing its tail cannot catch it and chew it for too long without learning that, invisible as it often seems, turns out the tail matters just as much as the teeth to the well-being of the one body. And if one cuts off one’s nose, it won’t simply spite the face but threaten the head with bleeding and the whole body with death—including the very hand that holds the blade. Martin Luther describes it like this: “If anyone’s foot hurts him, yes, even the little toe, the eye at once looks at it, the fingers grasp it, the face puckers, the whole body bends over to it, and all are concerned with this small member. Again, once it is cared for, all the other members are benefited.”

Our time and place has its own invisibles. We twenty-first-century-ers have people among us who can become invisible. We classify them as embryos—cells, tissue, tumors, uterine contents, products of conception, not human yet. Abortion assists us to overlook them as persons, those little unpretty inconveniences, and instead use them for research and experiment materials. Or we categorize the invisibles as elderly and incapacitated—better off dead, burdensome, not

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human anymore. Physician-assisted suicide allows us to ignore them as neighbors, those weak unproductive hindrances, and instead use them for inheritance or organ transplants. Or we label the invisibles as physically disabled and intellectually impaired—who would want to live like that, tragic and sad, not human entirely. Euthanasia empowers us to forget them and focus on “more important” matters, those embarrassing unpopular obstacles, and instead use them for excuses. “I should be free to live however I want so that I don’t end up with one of those.”

Of course, invisibility can indicate more about the observer than the overlooked. Someone’s invisibility may very well arise from your insufficiency and not theirs. The problem doesn’t lie with their position or their condition but with our vision. The problem lies with my vision, with your vision. We hide the least of these behind our euphemisms because their vulnerability vexes us. We annihilate them behind our excuses because their proximity perplexes us. We eradicate them behind our own emotions because their difficulties distress us. Let someone else have concern for them, we say. Let somebody else take care of them, we think. And our age disappears them, and our land vanishes them.

Why? Does my significance come only at his expense? Can you establish your importance by diminishing hers? Does “different” always have to denote a deficiency? We fear it that much—that we might not measure up, don’t we. So instead we measure down. We compare and we compete, because sinfulness has us convinced that only when it’s better than somebody else does it count as anything good. And we limit our line of sight to exclude almost everyone, not just the ones inhabiting the edges of existence, but our colleagues and peers too, our loved ones and even our own bodies.

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Just to secure a scrap of gratification? A shred of self-indulgence? Satan gets us to gut ourselves—survive by the sword and expire by the sword. We can't swing it at a neighbor without also slicing us. Cutting at their humanity costs us our own. Assess their life of no worth if you wish, but in sacrificing it to safeguard your own, you've equated the two in value and reduced yourself to nothing as well. You may have claimed the throne, but only over the ones you've already branded nobodies. Disconnecting any of us dooms us all. Cloaking one member with invisibility casts us each as invaluable.

But invisible doesn't mean nonexistent. And it doesn't mean insignificant. In fact, many of the most invisible things are actually pretty indispensable. How about a list? Start with tomorrow. And memories. Angels and germs. Love and gravity and God. Also, the Corinthian Epistle knows of another superpower, a real one that doesn't bring its own shortcomings with it. The Apostle Paul unmask the superpower that deactivates invisibility. Not time travel or teleportation, not half-man-half-animal or enhanced strength, not flight or lightning speed. The Word of the Lord unveils a superpower acquired from outside of us and thus available to everyone. This superpower eases and even heals the terrifying realization that we can't measure up. This Word undoes the disconnections, the discriminating, darkness, despair, and death itself.

We have the superpower of belonging. You belong. I belong. They belong. We belong to each other and to something bigger and to One greater. We belong to the One Father Almighty, who put His very energy in our race's once-nonexistent atoms and His own breath into our species' hitherto-invisible lungs, by creating humankind as His precious treasure. We belong to the One Christ Jesus, who put our insignificant flesh on His bones and our sinful blood into His veins, our guilt on His hands and our punishment upon His shoulders, by redeeming humankind

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with His incarnation, compassion, and crucifixion. We belong to the One Lord and Savior God, who put His forgiveness into our consciences and His resurrection into our broken little bodies and lives, by calling humankind His dwelling, His temple, from fertilization to forever His family, His household, and His inheritance. He has made us each for Himself, our hearts restless until they rest in Him, and that renders us all indispensable, part of a community, members of the kingdom, a system, a structure, a body together.

This body looks for you and every embryo. This family longs for you and each unborn. This household comes for you and all fetuses. This community calls for you and the rest of infants. This kingdom’s dying for you as the toddler. This system’s rising again for you as the youngster. This structure intercedes for you as the teenager. This institution atones for you as the student. It has you when adult. He holds you when afflicted, when impaired, when elderly, will and working for you through us.

So we don’t overlook abortion as somebody else’s business. You can’t ignore physician-assisted suicide as someone else’s problem. You won’t forget about surprise pregnancies, or infertilities, or embryo experiments, or terminal diagnoses. You won’t forget about the persons with disabilities, or about procreation and parenting, or about sanctity of life as if invisible. Every one involves our neighbor. Every single one affects our brother, our sister, our body, our blessing and treasure. Every last one concerns a gift, a privilege, a responsibility of ours and of our God, indispensable neighbors whose absence would impoverish not only our lives but our world and our one human race.

You get to speak heart-changing truth with them. You get to show life-saving love to them. They will benefit from your courage and compassion, and you will behold our Lord in

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theirs. No one lives to himself alone, and no one dies to himself alone. For whether we live or we die, we belong to the Lord—and also to one another. We need each other, and we have each other. And this gives our existence and our identity as humanity its delight; not indulgence and gratification, not comparing and scorekeeping, but fellowship, communion, interdependence, belonging.

Lutherans For Life exists for this. Lutherans For Life wants to equip every congregation in declaring it. Lutherans For Life works to assist every community in demonstrating it, that God creates and redeems and calls every human life as His own precious treasure from fertilization to forever. His grace, not anyone else’s age, appearance, or ability, gives sanctity and significance to each human being. Nobody’s size or shade can improve it, and nobody’s skills or circumstances can impair it. With this Gospel of Jesus Christ, we help you find motivation, get education, and take action to respect and protect especially the least of these.

And with us you can help so many others. The Gospel’s given you a front-row seat not only to witness but also to participate in Almighty God’s miraculous salvation, making a real immediate and eternal difference in individual souls and our whole society. May even those who permit, promote, or take part in using death as a solution know that their lives matter to our Heavenly Father as much as the ones that have been lost. May He grant that the victims of these lies and violences receive relief and healing in His forgiveness and faith, joy and hope, until the anger and the fear that drive these evils dissolve in the promise and presence and power of the Lord Jesus. And may we see every human being as neighbor and celebrate with them as brothers and sisters unto the ages of the ages. Amen.