

Deaths Cause Atheist to Reconsider God

1/23/2022

Dear Teacher,

The high number of deaths with Covid as a factor has left many people reeling and struggling with the impact of absence. In this installment of *The Wired Word*, we listen to the thoughts of an atheist as the collective weight of those deaths, coupled with the direct losses of a relative and a friend, make her long for some response outside of herself to this weight, and have even left her thinking, "Maybe I should go to church."

So we use the occasion of her words to consider how God sometimes reaches out to us through our unfocused yearnings and the sense that something is missing in our lives.

If you'd prefer a different topic, look at our second lesson, which explores the implications of a recent study of grocery store workers who are food and housing insecure, while the company that employs them has been making record profits during the pandemic. The situation raises questions of equity, worker-employee relations and money management. So those are the issues we will address in this lesson.

You are welcome to email the student version of either lesson to your class members, depending on which lesson you prefer to use for your class time. To do so, click here (<http://www.thewiredword.com/subscriber/studentlist.aspx>).

May God bless you as you teach the scriptures this week.

The Editorial Team of *The Wired Word*



Deaths Cause Atheist to Reconsider God

The Wired Word for the Week of January 23, 2022

In the News

Though she was raised in a conservative Christian home, as an adult, Sarah Jones, who writes for *New York* magazine, had become an atheist. But the death of her grandfather from Covid early in the pandemic and the more recent death by accident of a young friend have left her pondering whether going to church might help her deal with absence.

She thinks the huge number of deaths of people with Covid (editor's note: with, not necessarily caused by, Covid) -- more than 851,000 in the United States by the most recent count -- has left others with similar feelings. "Human beings are uncomfortable with absence," she said. "We like to find patterns, fill in blanks. An individual death creates a void in reality, and almost two years of constant death has left most of us groping in the dark."

Thus, when hundreds of thousands of white flags representing lives lost to Covid (or to Covid in conjunction with other conditions) were staked on the National Mall recently as a memorial, it occurred to Jones that she could plant a flag for her grandfather, but she decided that the gesture "feels thin."

"Not that the memorial is a bad idea," Jones said. "It may provoke in the viewer feelings of sadness or regret or the emotion that arises in response to an absence, an emotion I cannot name but that is as close to fatigue as it is to grief or nostalgia."

She went on to say, "I don't know what exactly I would want from a memorial -- whether it's catharsis or meaning or something else altogether. I thought several hundred times this year, *Maybe I should go to church.*"

There is some evidence that Jones' suspicion that the high number of Covid-related deaths may have left others feeling similarly. According to the most recent of the annual surveys by the funeral industry, the percentage of people age 40 and older who say that religion is "very important" in the funeral of a loved one has gone up for the first time in a decade.

That figure for that age group had been steadily dropping from 49% in 2012 to 35% in 2019, but after the pandemic hit, the number rose to 45% in 2020 and 47% in 2021.

Christianity Today, commenting on the survey, noted, "The majority of Americans still don't think religion is important at funerals, but a growing number are feeling a new need for it."

Thinking about her atheism, Jones said, "The universe, I had decided, contained nothing but bright light and the vacuum of space. So why," she asked, "after two years of plague, did I want to know if it hid anything else?"

Jones, who supports wearing masks and receiving the vaccines, nonetheless acknowledged that the feeling of some that they are entitled to crow over the deaths of anti-vaxxers who later died of the disease was creating a "demonic energy" that is pervasive in the country right now. Perhaps that also contributed to her wanting to go back to church, Jones speculated.

"I wondered if I'd discover a way to banish the darkness gathering around me and inside my brain. I wanted to transform absence into mystery Mostly I wanted a way to mourn, not just my own loss but the galloping mass death enveloping the world."

Jones said she longed for traits her old faith never really possessed. "I wanted something like mysticism, a shared search for revelation undertaken with the failing state of human affairs in mind. ... The space I lived in seemed to shrink as the pandemic wore on, and I wanted to stretch out my arms to something, even if I couldn't tell what it was."

In the end -- or at least by the end of her article -- Jones hadn't found what she longed for. "I listened for the still small voice, as Evangelicals like to say, and I heard nothing but shattering silence. So I listened to that instead. And I never went back to church."

She said the "nearest comfort" she found was in other people who listened while she talked about the one who had died.

"God may yet reveal himself to me," Jones said. "Unless he does, all that waits for me in the dark is other people trying to find their way out. ... We're it. That is what I heard in the silence."

More on this story can be found at these links:

Covid Diary: An Atheist Reconsiders God in the Pandemic. *New York*

(<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2021/10/covid-diary-atheist-god-grief.html>)

As Covid-19 Death Tolls Rise, More Americans Want Religious Funerals. *Christianity Today*

(https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/january-february/religious-funerals-rise-covid-memorial-study.html?share=AzeRJowUfWp08F7VUf0bcPj1ki4lspKJ&utm_medium=widgetsocial)

Applying the News Story

While we who are Christian believers might wish Jones' yearning for something to "banish the darkness gathering around" her and help her deal with absence caused by deaths had resulted in newfound faith in God, it's good that she could recognize her inner turmoil and discontent as possible avenues toward the mystery that is God. And it's also good that she has not assumed that atheism is necessarily the final word. "God may yet reveal himself to me," she said.

Through human history, some people have discovered that yearning, discontent or even a vague feeling that something is missing in their lives is sometimes an inroad God uses to awaken us to a need for connection to him. Centuries ago, St. Augustine prayed, "I call you into my soul, which you prepare to accept you by the longing that you breathe into it." He also said, "Our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee."

Our lesson today invites us to consider how what is going on in our emotions can be an invitation from God to move in his direction.

The Big Questions

1. What role, if any, did yearning, discontent, melancholy or a similar feeling play in leading you to seek the Lord? If none, what did draw you to God?
2. What do you make of Jones' conclusion that "all that waits for me in the dark is other people trying to find their way out. ... We're it. That is what I heard in the silence"?
3. Regarding listening for God, does a conviction that God exists help your hearing? Does a conviction that God does not exist deafen you?
4. What effect, if any, has the high number of deaths involving Covid had on you? What might it mean for us to be uncomfortable with the absence that the death of others imposes? What can we learn from it?
5. Regarding going back to church, what advice would you give Jones?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Isaiah 43:6-7

... bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth -- everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made. (For context, read Isaiah 43:1-7 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+43%3A1-7&version=NRSV>).)

In these verses God says he created people for his "glory," but the underlying Hebrew word is sometimes rendered as "myself," which suggests that God intended a close linkage between himself and humankind.

It stands to reason that the God who created us for himself but chooses to remain invisible would have implanted some sort of mechanism within us to enable us to sense our need for him. Yearning fits that bill and is why some spiritual writers have described it using terms such as holy discontent, an inner seeking, moral intuition, a thirst for God, a natural consciousness of God, a sense of eternity, a craving for the Divine, a spiritual homing instinct and similar terms.

Questions: Which, if any, of those terms apply for you? Why? Assuming not everyone is conscious of such feelings, what other mechanisms might God employ to make them aware of his reaching to them?

Ephesians 1:3

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places ... (For context, read Ephesians 1:3-14

(<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+1%3A3-14&version=NRSV>.)

The late Larry McMurtry, author of such books as *The Last Picture Show*, *Lonesome Dove* and *Terms of Endearment*, grew up in Texas. He took open space, long distances and a huge sky for granted. As a young adult, he moved to Virginia. There, he felt gloomy without knowing why. But on each trip home to Texas, he found his spirits lifted while there, where above was the kind of expanse where the sky and earth meet without forests or buildings interrupting the horizon. Conversely, as he returned to Virginia, his mood shifted the other way. He began to understand that many Westerners like himself have a "sky hunger."

McMurtry observes that most authors who write about the West mention the sky often, and he says that in the West, it's a wise thing to lift one's eyes skyward. That's because much of the land is ugly and brutal, whereas "the beauty of the sky is redemptive; its beauty prompts us to forgive the land its cruelty, its brutal power."

Sky hunger can be a metaphor for the spiritual longing many of us feel, even if we don't call it by that name or recognize it as anything more than a vague discomfort. And the sky is also a metaphor for what the scripture verse above refers to as "spiritual blessing in the heavenly places," which is offered to us by God.

Often, when we speak about the blessings God has given us, we think of material things or observable events: the bounty of the land, the goodness of our parents and so forth. But here in Ephesians, Paul is talking about blessings so different from material things that they have to be described as belonging to "heavenly places." These are the gifts of God that connect with us in our inward being, in that part of us that yearns for the sky or for beauty or for contentment or for goodness or for truth. These things are qualities of the spirit, or hungers of the personality, and they are hints of the existence of that which is greater than we are.

In other words, one gift or blessing God gives us is the ability to sense that in addition to being part of this world, we have a stake in another one as well -- a realm of the spirit. God has planted a "sky hunger" within us that causes us to reach for another kind of connection. Some of the time we are not even aware of it, and even when we are, the discontent is unfocused. But that vague discontent is a blessing from the heavenly places, a longing that causes us to search for God, to reach out in our spirit, even to pray.

Questions: What might it mean spiritually to suffer from "sky deprivation"? What makes it hard to sense God in this world? What makes it easy -- or at least, easier?

John 12:32

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. (For context, read John 12:27-36

(<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+12%3A27-36&version=NRSV>.)

Jesus said this while speaking about his impending crucifixion. Notice that he doesn't say he will *drag* all people to himself.

Questions: What does it mean that Jesus will *draw* all people unto himself? Name some of the different ways he does that.

John 4:14

... but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. (For context, read John 4:4-42

(<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+4%3A4-42&version=NRSV>.)

This is from Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar. The woman had spoken favorably of the water that came from that well. But Jesus responded by saying, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again" (v. 13). He then added the words of the verse above, concerning living water.

Questions: What is life-giving about the "water" Jesus offers? What thirst does it assuage? What role does the Holy Spirit have in making living water permanently thirst quenching?

For Further Discussion

1. There is scientific evidence that the human brain contains the circuitry to reach beyond what can be seen. The field of research called neurotheology explores the links between the brain and spirituality. Two leading figures in this field are neuroscientist Andrew Newberg and Eugene d'Aquili, a psychiatrist and anthropologist. In the early 1990s, the pair began using medical imaging technology called SPECT-scanning to map the brains of members of various religious orders as they entered into contemplative prayer. What they discovered is that as those praying moved deeper into prayer, the blood flow to a specific area of the brain decreased, and the pray-ers experienced a sense of transcending beyond themselves and of connecting with God. Newberg and d'Aquili actually have pictures of the changes in the blood flow to the brain.

While the subjects who participated in this study were members of contemplative orders to begin with, the researchers are convinced that smaller changes in blood flow occur in everyday sorts of spiritual experiences, such as when any one of us focuses intently in prayer.

So here's the question: Are spiritual feelings just a phenomenon generated by the brain, or has the brain truly been "wired" to look for God? The researchers cannot answer that question definitively, but they say yes to both possibilities.

2. Respond to this, from TWW team member Stan Purdum's sermon "Sky Hunger," based on Ephesians 1:3: "I like the expression 'sky hunger,' for it suggests that to make us the best earthbound people we can be, we need to lift our eyes to a higher place -- the *highest* place.

"I also like the term for another reason. Several years ago when I took a mission team to a work project in the hills of eastern Kentucky, I discovered that there is an interesting nickname for pastors among the people there. They are sometimes called 'sky pilots.' What better role can a pastor have than to point people to the skies, to the God Most High?

"Then, too, sky hunger reminds me of a verse from the great Easter hymn, 'Christ the Lord Is Risen Today,' a verse that proclaims our ultimate destination:

Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia!
Following our exalted Head, Alleluia!
Made like him, like him we rise, Alleluia!
Ours the cross, the grave, *the skies*, Alleluia!

"So as a sky pilot, let me say it plainly. That to which our holy restlessness, our inner discontent, our sky hunger points us is Christ. Sky hunger is a blessing from God, Paul tells us, to bring us into Christ, to fullness of life, and to life eternal."

3. How important is it to you that religion be a part of the funeral of a loved one?

Responding to the News

This is a good time to consider whether our unfocused yearnings and vague discontents may be God inviting us to draw nearer to him.

Prayer

O Lord, help us to be aware of the unexpected ways in which you may speak to us. And when we hear only silence and find ourselves groping in the dark, enable our faith to find a lighted bridge to you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Other News This Week

'Essential Workers' in Highly Profitable Grocery Chain Struggle with Food and Housing Insecurity

The Wired Word for the Week of January 23, 2022

In the News

According to a recent nonprofit Economic Roundtable study of more than 10,000 unionized workers at Kroger-owned stores in California, Colorado and Washington, two out of three of those surveyed say they struggle to pay for food and housing; 78% of the workforce lack consistent access to enough food to maintain an active, healthy lifestyle; and 14% reported that they needed food stamps and/or foodboxes from a food bank during 2021.

One in seven of the chain's national workforce of 465,000 also experienced housing instability during the past 12 months, meaning they were or are currently homeless, and more than a third of survey respondents say they worry about eviction.

In the past three decades, adjusting for inflation, wages for the most experienced Kroger food clerks declined between 11% and 22% across the regions surveyed, according to the study.

Kroger, which operates about 2,800 stores under different brands, including Ralphs, Fred Meyer, and Food 4 Less, is the nation's largest grocery store chain and fourth-largest private employer. Its profits skyrocketed during the pandemic, as more people prepared meals at home rather than dining out. In 2020, the company made \$4.1 billion in profit and, in the first three quarters of 2021, had \$2.28 billion cash on hand.

Over \$22 million, nearly double the \$12 million he made in 2018, went to Kroger CEO Rodney McMullen. Kroger stockholders took stock buybacks of an estimated \$1.3 billion during the first three quarters of 2021. Meanwhile, the median worker pay at Kroger was \$24,617 in 2021, meaning the CEO made 909 times the pay of the average worker.

"The biggest irony and tragedy is that here are people who spend all day around food, and when they go home they can't afford to feed their families adequately," said Peter Dreier, a researcher on the project.

Deli worker Jeanne Olsen says she rides the bus to the Ralphs where she works six days a week, and walks four miles home after the buses stop running, because she can't afford a car. The 59-year-old supplements her income by picking up recyclable cans and bottles to earn an extra \$100-\$150 per month so she and her son have enough money for groceries. She earned \$14.90 an hour last year and got a dollar-an-hour raise at the beginning of 2022.

Robin White, 35, who worked at a Ralphs, had her hours cut in half when the pandemic hit. She could no longer afford rent, so she slept in her car with her 9-year-old son for a while, until she lost her car and had to move in with her mother.

"It's a game, I guess, they play, and they'll give you an increase in pay like a dollar but then they'll snatch hours," White said. "So ... you still don't make ends meet."

The Economic Roundtable report, which recommended higher minimum wages, food discounts and twice as many full-time positions, was released ahead of upcoming talks between Kroger and the United Food and Commercial Workers Union to renegotiate their contract with about 33,000 workers in Southern California, which is due to expire March 6.

In the grocery chain's defense, Kroger representative John Votava says they offer higher wages, healthcare and retirement benefits to hourly associates even though "93% of corporations no longer provide [these benefits]."

Kroger has resisted government mandates of temporary \$5-an-hour "hero or hazard pay" boosts for grocery workers during the pandemic, citing the requirement as part of their decision to close three grocery stores in Los Angeles in March 2021.

Kroger associates cite unpredictable schedules, low wages and limited opportunities for full-time employment as factors that contribute to their economic vulnerability. One in four survey participants said they were given 24 hours' notice or less about schedule changes, making it next to impossible to work second jobs.

A Kroger spokesperson responded that many of their workers are part-time by choice, saying it offers them greater flexibility.

Olsen, the deli worker who recycles cans and bottles to pay for groceries, said she just wants to be paid a fair wage, to be paid what she's worth.

More on this story can be found at these links:

2 Out of 3 Kroger Workers Struggle to Afford Food and Housing, Survey Finds. *Los Angeles Times* (<https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2022-01-11/2-out-of-3-kroger-workers-struggle-to-afford-food-housing-survey-finds>) Kroger Workers Experienced Hunger, Homelessness, and Couldn't Pay Their Rent in 2021. Its CEO Made \$22 Million the Previous Year. *Business Insider*

(<https://www.businessinsider.com/1-in-7-kroger-workers-homeless-many-food-insecure-rent-2022-1>) Non-Rich Folks Are Pointing Out Things the Wealthy Don't Understand About Poverty, and It's Eye-Opening. *Yahoo.com* (<https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/poor-folks-sharing-wish-rich-014602450.html>)

Applying the News Story

The factors that contribute to poverty are many. Some depend on an individual's talent, intelligence, level of education, family environment, health, work ethic, goals, assets, choices and other personal attributes, while other contributing factors are beyond an individual's control. Employers, civic authorities and communities of faith all have a role to play in addressing issues of equity, worker-employee relations and money management. We hope this study guide aids you in addressing some of the problems facing the working poor today.

The Big Questions

1. To the extent you are comfortable, share an experience you have had with poverty, and how that experience impacted you.
2. What strategies do you think are most likely to be effective in minimizing problems of food insecurity and housing instability?
3. How much do you think problems of poverty arise out of social structures? To what extent are these problems attributable to individual choices and behavior? Explain.
4. What encouragement does our faith offer to people struggling with poverty?
5. What guidance does the Bible provide regarding how we should handle wealth when we have more than we need?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

1 Samuel 25:10-11

But Nabal answered David's servants, "Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants today who are breaking away from their masters. Shall I take my bread and my water and the meat that I have butchered for my shearers, and give it to men who come from I do not know where?" (For context, read 1 Samuel 25:2-20, 35-38 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Samuel+25%3A2-20%2C+35-38&version=NRSV>)).

This chapter tells the story of Nabal, a man who, despite his immense wealth, was "surly and mean" (vv. 2-3). It was customary to provide sustenance to people who acted as an informal kind of security force to protect one's people and property. So after David's band of men had served Nabal in that way, David sent a cadre of 10 young men to ask for supplies (vv. 4-9).

Nabal's attitude is revealed in the way he talked about his wealth, which he repeatedly describes as *his*: "*my* bread and *my* water and the meat that *I* have butchered for *my* shearers." There is no sense that Nabal considers himself a steward or caretaker of property and goods that belong to God, for which he is responsible but which he does not own.

When Nabal responded to David's request with insults, David prepared to assault Nabal and his household. Fortunately, Nabal's wife, Abigail, heard about it and intervened, bringing food for David's men (vv. 18-19), thus averting disaster.

Later, Nabal held a feast fit for a king, during which he made merry and got very drunk (v. 36). It's clear from the description of Nabal's wealth and conduct that he could well afford to pay David's men for providing security for him; he just didn't feel like sharing! The day after the feast, Abigail told her husband that she had complied with David's request, and Nabal was so shocked that he apparently had a heart attack or stroke, leading to his death 10 days later.

Questions: How can we nurture the attitude of a steward regarding the things we own? What is the relationship between stewardship and hospitality?

Luke 16:13-15, 25-26

[Jesus said,] "You cannot serve God and wealth." The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God." ... [Jesus continued his parable:] "But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.'" (For context, read Luke 16:13-15, 19-31 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+16%3A13-15%2C+19-31&version=NRSV>)).

In this text, we have an upstairs-downstairs kind of story, a parable Jesus told that parallels the differences in privileges and opportunities we see in shows such as *Downton Abbey*.

A certain rich man lived very well in a fine house, dressed in purple fabric and fine linen only the wealthy could afford, feasting on sumptuous meals every single day. Meanwhile, outside his gate lay a desperately poor, sick and hungry man named Lazarus, covered with sores. He would have gladly eaten the scraps that fell from the rich man's table, crumbs that his dogs licked off the floor, but he wasn't allowed in even for that purpose. The rich man's dogs had it better than Lazarus did!

Eventually, both men died. Lazarus was carried by angels to be with Abraham in paradise, and the rich man ended up in torment in Hades, the final destination of the unrighteous. Seeing Lazarus far off with Abraham, the rich man begged Abraham to send Lazarus to him with a drop of water for his tongue. Even in death, the rich man felt entitled to be served by the poor man!

Abraham spoke to the rich man as a parent might speak to a stubborn child who insists on his own way. "During your life," Abraham said, "you had plenty and Lazarus had nothing. But now things have reversed."

Jesus told this parable in response to some Pharisees who were "lovers of money." The problem Jesus identified was not having wealth, but prizes the lifestyle of the rich and famous (1 Timothy 6:10 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Timothy%206%3A10&version=NRSV>)) more than the poor on one's doorstep.

Questions: What does this parable suggest about the importance of making decisions in this life concerning money management and how we treat the poor?

How can we avoid the pitfalls of loving money and the benefits it can bring more than we love those who are less fortunate?

1 Corinthians 11:20-22, 33

When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! ... So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. (For context, read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+11%3A17-34&version=NRSV>)).

Most of us are familiar with verses 23-26 of this chapter, since they are frequently quoted when we partake at the Lord's Table. We may think primarily of the suffering and physical death of Jesus on the cross, and it is certainly fitting that we should meditate on our Savior in this way. But it's important that we understand the larger context of those verses as well.

Paul notes that when the Corinthian believers gather to observe the Lord's supper, they are not united, but divided (vv. 18-19). The reason for this disunity? Because they were not eating *the Lord's supper*, but each one his *own supper*, without regard to those who had nothing. So some had more than enough, even to the point of drunkenness, while others, who didn't have the luxury of not having to work for a living, came late to the meal and went hungry.

To put it another way, Paul says, those who were in a hurry to get to the table before others were not "discerning the body" of Christ. Jesus identified so completely with his people that he suffered when they suffered (Acts 9:1-5 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+9%3A1-5&version=NRSV>)). In this case, not discerning the body of Christ means not recognizing that Christ is present in our brothers and sisters in the Lord. That means if we gobble up all the food or resources to satisfy our own appetite, we are letting Jesus go hungry!

Questions: What makes the Lord's supper different from our own supper?

How does Paul's admonition to "wait for one another" apply in general, in situations that don't involve meals, for example?

1 Corinthians 12:22-26 (NLT)

In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary. And the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care. So we carefully protect those parts that should not be seen, while the more honorable parts do not require this special care. So God has put the body together such that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. This makes for

harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad. (For context, read 1 Corinthians 12:18-27 NLT (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+12%3A18-27&version=NLT>).

In this passage, Paul compares God's people to a physical body that has many parts, all with different functions, but which all work together for the health and well-being of the whole. The less visible and hidden parts of the body are just as necessary and important as the more prominent or vocal parts.

Whether we apply the metaphor of a body to those who look to Jesus as their Lord and Savior, to a nation or to humanity as a whole, the principles Paul enunciates here are equally valid and useful. Paul's vision is of a kind of *e pluribus unum*, i.e., "Out of many, one," or "One for all, and all for one!"

While no human institution operates with the same attention to equity that is found in the kingdom of God, Jesus taught us to pray that God's kingdom would come and that God's will might be done "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matt+6%3A10&version=NRSV>)).

Questions: What would happen to a physical body if some parts acted as though they could live without other parts of the body?

How would you apply the body metaphor to a civic society like ours? To the current situation in the news article above?

What obligation, if any, do we have as followers of Jesus to work to establish a civic order that embodies, to the best of our ability, kingdom-of-God principles of the value of each person in our society and the worth of what each has to contribute to the whole?

How do you communicate special care, protection and honor to people in your sphere of influence who may not seem as capable, deserving or important to your community, church or nation?

For Further Discussion

1. Respond to this, from a salesperson for a business-to-business publishing company (name withheld upon request): "I have customers who are entrepreneurs and are angry at having to pay more now than pre-pandemic for office and warehouse workers. Most of them have way more than enough in their own compensation for themselves and their families -- the reward, I suppose, for the risks they take to own and build businesses. Some are quietly generous to charities, but would draw a line at pay scales for lower-wage workers in their own companies.

"Sometimes I watch on CNBC the show *Undercover Boss*, and routinely, the big boss uncovers people in their own company with huge struggles. The show typically ends with the boss giving huge sums of money and opportunities to those people. I wonder if any of the execs featured really look at their compensation versus what their workers make, and find any opportunities for more pay equity."

2. Some years ago, a man who identified himself as a Christian wrote a letter to advice columnist Ann Landers, describing how he handled the matter of tipping when he ate out. Instead of leaving any money for the server, he left a gospel tract, figuring that the best "tip" he could give was to tell the server about Christ.

Landers branded him as a self-centered cheapskate. Perhaps Jesus would call him a lover of money. Whether we like the tipping system or not, people who rely on tips are often struggling to get by.

While we may not be able to relate to how a multibillion-dollar industry handles company profits, the matter of whether and how to tip someone who has rendered a service to us may hit closer to home.

What principles rooted in your faith guide you in the decisions you make regarding spending, tipping, donating, saving and investing the money you have?

3. What do you make of this list of things people in poverty wish the rich understood about being poor (<https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/poor-folks-sharing-wish-rich-014602450.html>)? Does it ring true in your ears? How do you think Jesus would respond to people who raise these concerns?

Responding to the News

The next time you come to the Lord's Table, look at the people around you. Do you discern the body of Christ in them? How about the next time you go grocery shopping? Look closely.

Prayer suggested by Luke 1:46-55 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+1%3A46-55&version=NRSV>) and Hebrews 13:5 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews%2013%3A5&version=NRSV>)

We magnify you, O Lord, and rejoice in God our Savior. You scatter the proud and bring down the powerful from their thrones. You lift up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty.

Keep our lives free from the love of money, and help us to be content with what we have, as long as you are with us. Free our hearts from the grip of greed and the clutches of covetousness, and satisfy our hunger for fairness and justice for all. May our relationships with others be characterized by your compassion, for Jesus' sake and by the power of your Spirit at work among us. Amen.

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