

1 Corinthians 12:12-27
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One Small Step

Fifty years ago this past week, a human being took his first step on the moon, and Neil Armstrong's first words became the stuff of history. But apparently we didn't really hear what he actually said. The quote we recall—the one touted in history books and on the news, is “That’s one small step for man; on giant leap for mankind.” In reality, Armstrong says he said, “That’s one small step for (a) man; one giant leap for mankind.”¹ Speech experts and other researchers have spent hours listening for that missing “a.” Some hear it; others don’t. But most agree that the “a” is implied, that Armstrong understood himself not as a lone ranger, superhero type, but as the one human being given the extraordinary opportunity to be the first to step on that faraway rocky terrain on behalf of all of us. He understood himself as part of a larger whole.

To use Paul’s language, we might understand Armstrong and other heroes like him as part of the body, but maybe one of the better parts, like a strong arm or a swift leg, rather than say, an elbow or a knuckle or a belly button or a toenail. But that’s just it. Paul wants to make sure that we all view ourselves as indispensable parts of a larger whole, not matter what our part may be, and that we view others as indispensable parts, too, no matter which parts they may be. This is an internal memo of sorts, a letter to the church at Corinth. That young church apparently had some pecking-order issues, some mistaken ideas that some members were more important than others. Paul wants to make it clear in no uncertain terms that baptism—that messy, wet, public welcome into Christ’s church—is the great equalizer, that in our being brought into

¹ <https://time.com/5621999/neil-armstrong-quote/>

Christ's church, in being made part of his body, we are all equally indispensable, crucial to God's mission in and for the world.

Joanne Thompson, Lillie Elliott, Ruth Anna Ratledge, and Anna Lee Minner were seamstresses who worked in a factory owned by Playtex, also known as International Latex Corporation in Dover, Delaware. Before their company signed a contract with NASA, they spent their days sewing undergarments, including girdles. After the NASA project came online, these women were part of the crew who cut the patterns and stitched every stitch of the spacesuits the astronauts wore. The seamstresses got to know the astronauts through personal visits for fittings and through the photos of the men's faces that hung with each suit. They knew that the men's lives were in their hands. Their careful attention to each stitch ensured the astronauts' safety as they headed into the great unknown:

Seamstress Joanne Thompson said, 'We would have astronauts come in and thank us, and that was a real boost. It made a connection there that you didn't forget.'

And on July 20, 1969, when the big moment finally arrived, the women of International Latex held their breath. Lillie Elliott recalled, 'Once they started down the ladder, and he put his foot on the moon, that was a pinnacle of watching something that you've helped do.'²

Every spacesuit they created worked beautifully; not one failed to keep an astronaut safe. Their work never made headlines or get top billing, but their work was indispensable; they were indispensable to the larger mission.

Do you realize that you are indispensable to the body of Christ? Do you realize that everyone who shares your baptism is also indispensable to the body of Christ? I'm not sure

² <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/apollo-11-the-seamstresses-who-helped-put-a-man-on-the-moon/>

which of those questions is harder to answer, but I think they are crucial questions for us to consider, because they get to the very heart of who we are called to be as a community, as Christ's body in and for the world.

Later this morning, we will spend some time working on projects for neighbors nearby and faraway. We will likely never know their names or their stories, and yet the time, the prayers, the energy, the intention, and the work you offer is indispensable to the larger mission God calls us to. Assembling a Welcome Home Kit, making cards or creating tray decorations for Meals on Wheels, rolling sweatpants for Project ASK, preparing supplies for Dress A Girl kits: all of these seemingly small acts make a real difference in the lives of friends and strangers. We need you, we need each other to accomplish the mission, but your being indispensable goes far beyond these activities. Your being indispensable extends beyond this one day. You are members, we are members—limbs, the Greek tells us—of the body of Christ. You ARE. Y'all are. All y'all are. All of us, young, old, fast, slow, happy, grumpy, grieving the past, lamenting the present, or excited about the future. All of us. We ARE now members of the body of Christ. There is no opt out clause, no exceptions to the rule. Whether you are a strong shoulder or the daintiest pinky toe or something in between, you are indispensable to the body of Christ, as is your pew mate, as are our brothers and sisters worshipping in sanctuaries around the corner, across the river, and around the world. We may not always agree on what kind of music we should sing or the role of women or politics or plans for a way forward in this divided moment. We differ in so many ways, but that does not seem to bother Paul. In his moment and in ours, I get the sense that he is concerned with how we view ourselves and one another inside the church. God still has big hopes for the body of Christ. God still counts on us to bring God's radical love in Jesus Christ to a world in desperate need of loving, saving, and redeeming, and God expects

us to be the ones to do that work, to help pull off that mission. But if Paul is to be believed, we have some homework, some bodywork to do first. How we work with and welcome the great and the not-so-great, the beautiful and the less-than-perfect as a community and as individuals shapes us at a fundamental level. We are members—arms, legs, hands, feet, elbows, toenails, and kneecaps—indispensable parts one and all in the body of Christ. And they are, too.

The women who stitched those first spacesuits are retired now, but they would do it again in a heartbeat:

‘We enjoyed every bit of it, every stitch. I would do it all over again if I could,’ said Ruth Anna Ratledge...

‘You'd still like to be doin' it?’ asked [interviewer Tracey] Smith

‘Yes,’ she laughed. ‘I loved it.’

Joanne Thompson added, ‘Wow, I'm still amazed, it was great!’

...ILC is still making spacesuits ... and who knows? An ILC suit might one day go to Mars. But it all began with Apollo 11, and a small group of dedicated women back on Earth who helped bring us all just a little closer to the heavens.³

Isn't that our calling, too, to reflect God's love to one another and the world? We cannot save ourselves, nor can we save one another, but we can show one another the love of Christ, and we can live that love in the world. In that sense—each and every member, each and every part, each and every limb—can do our indispensable, irreplaceable bit, our one small step toward drawing one another just a little closer to the heavens. And by the grace of God, we will find ourselves stitched more closely to each other and to Christ himself without ever leaving planet earth.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/apollo-11-the-seamstresses-who-helped-put-a-man-on-the-moon/>