



portraits by Amedeo Clemente Modigliani

**O**UT OF ALL THE BEASTS WITH WHICH WE LIVE—a congregation which includes wild turkeys, possums, squirrels and chipmunks, rabbits, raccoons, groundhogs, and the odd badger and bobcat—none is as destructive as the deer.

During my weekly sojourn about the property mowing off the grass, it is my habit to take mental inventory of all the nooks and crannies: the progress of the growing things, the rotted oak limbs that have fallen, new holes and runs made by moles—as well as all the latest nibblings of our hooved friends.

They fancy the fruit trees, and the mature apple, cherry, and pear trees in our orchard have all been pruned from the bottom up by the browsing deer. But also on their diet are the decorative bushes, gladiolus, red twig dogwoods, hostas, evergreen trees, elm tree

seedlings, and, of course, anything and everything planted in the vegetable garden. Practically anything we set out will quickly become appetizer or main course for a deer dinner.

This time of the year their voracious gaze falls lovingly upon the delicate and sweet-tasting new growth in the gardens. So we take extraordinary measures to protect that which we hope will grace our dinner table later in the season. For the first time, this year we have erected continuous fencing around the entire perimeter of the vegetable garden. The taller fence stops the deer, while the base

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When Christians say the Christ-life is in them, they do not mean simply something mental or moral. When they speak of being “in Christ” or of Christ being “in them,” this is not simply a way of saying that they are thinking about Christ or copying Him. They mean that Christ is actually operating through them; that the whole mass of Christians are the physical organism through which Christ acts—that we are His fingers and muscles, the cells of His body.

C. S. Lewis

of finer fencing stops the rabbits. So this year the garden is safe from the hungry critters.

Still, it is impossible to fence off every living plant, bush and tree on the property, so the nibbling proceeds apace. But then, bless their hearts, just when the steam is really building behind our ears, a young doe will bring her little fawns around for our appraisal. Usually around dusk, when the descending sun has painted the west lawn a deep amber glow, they will come by—the doe cautious and attentive to her little ones, the fawns prancing about, too young to know fear.

The mother will often use our fences to teach the fawns how to leap, effortlessly gliding over first, then turning to coax the little ones over with low grunts. The fawns will get all sick and nervous, running back and forth before the fence bleating their alarm, sure that they can’t possibly duplicate their mother’s feat. We watch and we smile, and—forgetting all about the beans and peas and apple trees that have been mangled by their appetite—we are grateful for the opportunity to be a part of these little dramas.

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

*Galatians 3:26-28*

Life in the body of Christ can be very much like living with deer.

Just as in any other assemblage of humans, the maneuverings of the relationship-dance can be messy. The presence of the unifying Spirit does not nullify the presence of weak flesh. Both are combined in what at times can become an unsightly mélange of good-intentioned, but ultimately self-protective individuals.

The members of Christ’s body—the church universal, as well as the church local—may, on occasion, play out the worst of the species. Like voracious deer, we nibble away at each other, gossip and fret, say hurtful things that leave gaping wounds. We play one person against the next, finagle our way onto committees, ingratiate ourselves to those in power while snubbing those who are not. Even when we think we may have found

a way to rise above all the politics of “church,” just when we think we have made some tangible progress in our way toward the example of Christ, one of His other children comes along and chops us off at the knees.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

*Ephesians 4:11-13*

Yet, as brutal as life can be in the body, these same people can also be a source of great strength and consolation. The body of Christ is comprised of individuals who laugh together, weep together, and earnestly care about each other. We encourage, we inspire each other, we sit by hospital beds. We hold each other by the hand through hard times, and we hold each other up when trials are more than we think we can bear. We rejoice in seeing each other’s children grow and mature in the Lord. And every person in the body is another rung on the ladder leading us upward to Christ.

We are not just fellows in a club; we are brothers and sisters in Christ. We are kin. We are all of the same blood type: the blood of Christ. Thus we are ready and willing whenever a transfusion becomes necessary.

In the flesh, members of Christ can be as voracious and consuming as anyone else. But in the Spirit, we are prepared to give our lives for each other.

This is the paradox of the deer—and the dear people in the body of Christ.

