

“The Body of Christ”
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO
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1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many. We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one Spirit to drink. Certainly the body isn't one part but many. If the foot says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not a hand," does that mean it's not part of the body? If the ear says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not an eye," does that mean it's not part of the body? If the whole body were an eye, what would happen to the hearing? ...If all were one and the same body part, what would happen to the body? But as it is, there are many parts but one body. ...The parts of the body that people think are the weakest are the most necessary. The parts of the body that we think are less honorable are the ones we honor the most. ...God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the part with less honor so that there won't be division in the body and so the parts might have mutual concern for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it. You are the body of Christ and parts of each other.

Have you noticed that people seem to get more out of a story or an anecdote than they do from something that is totally just lecture? This is true for most people. Any parent can tell you that fairy tales and fables work better to help kids relate to the world than simply telling them how to behave. The same is true for adults. Jesus used parables to get his message across, and pastors use what are called “sermon illustrations.”

One of the difficult things about preaching the Bible is that sometimes there's very little in a biblical passage to which a modern congregation might relate. This passage, however, presents the opposite problem. When I think about many parts making one body, there's *too* much that comes to mind. I think of the Colorado Springs Philharmonic – an orchestra with various instruments all coming together to make great music. I think of the Broncos, or the Sky Sox, or the Nuggets – sports teams – each player doing his or her own part within the team to win. I think of Fort Carson – an organization of soldiers each with his or her own purpose in the Army, and also one station among many in the country that are all working together to defend, secure, and protect.

Soldiers, sports teams, a music orchestra. All of these show many individuals, working together to achieve a goal. Each person has a unique task that helps the whole get a larger job done. And without each individual person, the whole would fail. That's exactly what this passage is talking about.

Paul faced the same dilemma I faced in writing this sermon: how to relate a lesson to things his audience experienced every day. He needed to convey the kind of unity that they're supposed to have with one another, and to resolve the factions and squabbles that were happening. So, Paul used an illustration that *everyone* could relate to – the human body.

Paul basically said that it didn't make sense to fight about which person was better spiritually, since each gift, each person was necessary to the church – to the body of Christ. Not only was Paul telling the congregation not to waste time arguing about these things – he was giving them a relatable, understandable lesson about their purpose. By pointing out that their collective purpose was the result of many parts working together, he gave them a way to see that the role of each individual was important, and that they should respect each other's roles, as well as their own.

Not only is Paul's illustration timeless and universal, but so is Paul's message. The Church is the Body of Christ, and each person is an important part of the Body. We, too – the Church, the Body of Christ – can benefit from a renewed sense of what our purpose truly is. We too can benefit from a renewed sense of respect for our own *individual* purpose, and a respect for all those working with us.

As a congregation, I want us to look at the three things Paul asked the Corinthians to look at: our purpose, your respect for your own individual role, and our respect for the roles of all those around us.

First, what our purpose as a Church truly is. Paul tells the Corinthians, and us, God's purpose in the very next chapter and verses after this one – I am almost certain that you have heard it. 1 Corinthians 13 starts saying:

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. . . . Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.”

And it continues on the characteristics of our purpose – the one thing that ties all of different gifts and roles together – love.

God’s purpose is for love to ultimately infuse the world so that evil *cannot* exist alongside it.

Ultimately, every single person in the world will have justice and freedom. Ultimately, money will not cause grief and loneliness. It’s not just those *without* money who suffer from the evil and injustice in our world, but those with money and power, too. Grief, suffering, loneliness afflict everyone. God’s purpose for love will ultimately mean that relationships will not be based on manipulation and selfishness, and that the laws of the land will *protect* those who are most vulnerable.

Our purpose as a Church is to spread and grow the love of God, individuals whose actions each and every day work together to make that purpose happen, like individual lights that all come together to make a light so large and bright that there are no dark corners.

In his book *The Pursuit of Excellence*, Ted Engstrom wrote these words: "I was cleaning out a desk drawer when I found a flashlight I hadn't used in over a year. I flipped the switch, but wasn't surprised when it gave no light. I unscrewed it to get the batteries out, but they wouldn't budge.

"Finally, after some effort, they came loose. What a mess! Battery acid had corroded the entire inside of the flashlight. The batteries were new when I'd put them in, and I'd stored them in a safe, warm place. But there was one problem. Those batteries weren't made to be warm and comfortable. They were designed to be turned on -- to be used.

“It's the same with us. We weren't created to be warm, safe and comfortable. You and I were made to be 'turned on' -- put our love to work, to apply our patience in difficult, trying situations -- to let

our light shine." (<http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-bobby-scobey-stories-wise-using-talent-75466.asp>)

Each of us has a flashlight. Each of us has God's love inside of us. Our purpose is to *use* it to spread and grow God's love in and to the world.

This brings us to the second lesson from Paul's words to the Corinthians, the universal message that applies to us all – a renewed sense of respect for your own individual purpose.

There's a modern paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 12, our passage this morning, that reminds me of the great *need* for each person in the body of the Christ. It goes like this:

*There is one Spirit, but a variety of gifts.
There is one Lord, but a variety of ways that people serve.
There is one God and Father, but a variety of ways that people work for the kingdom.*

*God gives different gifts to different people.
Some, a passion for peace;
Others, a passion for political freedom.
Some, a passion for life and its sacredness,
Others, a passion for forgiveness and mercy.
Some, a passion for a more closed interpretation of the Bible,
Others, a passion for a more open interpretation of the Bible.
Some, a passion for evangelism,
Others, a passion for justice.
All of these people around you this morning are working for the common good.
Each and every one of these people are inspired by the one and same Spirit, the Spirit who gives to each person their unique and different perspective.*

For just as the human body is a unified whole, composed of millions of different parts, so is Christ and his body.

*The human body is miraculously complex,
With 60 million cells,
With 36 million heart beats every year,
With 300 billion red cells produced every day,
With 60,000 miles of blood vessels in each body.*

Just as the human mind cannot begin to fathom the complexity of its own body, so it is with us, with the body of Christ. Our minds cannot comprehend the complexity of the body of Christ.

Christ is a living body, composed of billions of parts, miraculously complex, with billions of members, located in millions of different settings, with thousands of different languages, with thousands of unique cultures and billions of expressions of the true faith...throughout all the centuries of recorded time.

The human mind cannot begin to fathom the complexity of the body of Christ, anymore than the human mind can imagine the 60,000 miles of blood vessels in one's own physical body.

If you have these gifts, if you have these passions in your heart, these workings, these ways of serving God's kingdom; but if you don't have love inside of you for your brothers and sisters who think and feel differently than you, you are nothing. The greatest gift that God has for you is love. Love for people who don't think like you. Love for people who do not share your point of view on specific issues. You are to make love your goal, your aim, your greatest purpose for life.

The great thing is that there is room in the body of Christ for *everyone*. Participation in the body of Christ is not a limited resource.

Each person here is a member of the body of Christ. Each person is a part of the purpose, and the work of the church is not the work of the ministers, of the staff. It is the work of the *church* – the whole of the church, each participant important in working to achieve the mission of the church – to spread and grow the love of god.

I have seen you respond to the mission of the church. You work as part of the body of Christ by responding to mission activity like IHN or Feed My Starving Children. Through donations to ESM and Week of Compassion. Through your weekly offerings of money and time – through your presence here this morning. I have seen you lead classes, I have seen you organize events that will help someone else, or events that provide fellowship and care. I have seen you pray for others, write encouraging emails or send cards; I have seen you provide flowers for our worship, and sing out as part of our worship to the God of love. I have seen you respond when people are needed to clean up after a hail storm. I have seen you *listen* to each other with respect, acknowledging each person's value, even if you do not agree with their viewpoints.

YOU are a member of the Body of Christ, and that means that you work to achieve the purpose of the Church, to grow and spread the love of God. Your contribution to the body is *important*, even if you think your role is small.

Now, the third point of the lesson – a renewed sense of respect for all those working with you. You are a member of the Body of Christ, and that means that in your work to achieve the purpose of the Church, you have a whole world of people who are working on that goal with you – people in our denomination, as well as people in the hundreds of other Church/religious groupings in the world.

We are part of a strange and wondrous community here in Colorado Springs. A city that is known for its evangelical Christian elements, and yet that has quite a *diverse* population of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and other religious bodies that are not in fact *separate* bodies but all a part of the *same* purpose to spread and grow the love of God. We are also a part of a wider church family in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in which the congregation, regional leadership, and general leadership work together in a bonded tie that strengthens each separate part.

All of these parts of the body of Christ are important in serving God's purpose to spread and grow God's love. Colorado Springs is a better place because we have all of these neighbors helping us achieve God's purpose.

For example, this congregation very much values *growing* in our faith. However, to be honest, we do not actually do a great job of *speaking* about our faith to those who are brand new to Christianity. It is not something that we have developed or put much time or energy into, though we know it is important. There *are* other congregations that *have* put time and energy into *speaking* about their faith to others, and introducing Christ's great love to others. We are *both* different parts of the *same* body of Christ.

As another example, just look at Interfaith Hospitality Network. IHN is a *network* of dozens of churches that work together to house homeless families in their buildings. Tonight and every night this week, this building will host three homeless families. Last night, those families stayed at another church building. Next week, they will stay in yet another church building. All of the churches in Colorado Springs working together to spread and grow God's love makes serving those families *possible*.

There is room in the body of Christ for *everyone*. We are all a part of the Church, with the purpose of spreading and growing God's love for all.

Paul's sermon illustration is just the beginning of the lesson we receive in First Corinthians. The Church *is* just like a human body. We know our purpose as church, we know that each and every individual has an important role in fulfilling that purpose, and we know that we have partners around the world who are working with us. *Thank you* for your role in the Body of Christ. Whatever your passion, whatever your gift, you are important. Go then, and spread and grow the love of God to all.

Amen.