

“Life Together”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 29, 2019

First Scripture Reading: Philippians 2:1-5

¹If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

Second Scripture Reading: 1st Corinthians 12:12-20

¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body.



Sermon: “Life Together”

Have you ever had the joyful experience of working on a group project? Maybe as a student? Or in your profession? If not, then you have definitely missed out. Working with a group of people to achieve a common end can be both exhilarating and terrifying. When you’ve got a massive venture to undertake, it can be a relief to know that you only have to work on one small part of it, knowing that other competent people are handling the other aspects of the job. Then at the end, you put all of your individual work together and out comes something that would have been unthinkable to accomplish for any one of the participants.

That’s the good side of group projects. The bad side is when you work really hard on your assignment only to come back together and realize that other folks ... didn’t. For a group project to really work, everyone has to do their part. But not only that, everyone has to be able to trust that everyone else is doing their part, too.

In a restaurant, waitstaff often bear the brunt of customer complaints when a meal doesn’t go right. But waitstaff depend on line-cooks and sous-chefs to prep meals correctly and expeditors to get plates out of the kitchen and bartenders to serve drinks and bussers to remove empty dishes and clutter from the table. Diners at a restaurant usually see only the server and often fail to realize how many people are involved in their dining experience. If any *one* person fails to do their job, it diminishes the effectiveness of all the others.

It’s the same thing in any group undertaking really. Football. All 11 people on the field have to do their job or none of them succeed. A quarterback can’t throw if he’s running for his life because an offensive lineman didn’t block. But an offensive lineman can’t block effectively if the quarterback doesn’t run the right play. In an orchestra, musicians have to depend on each other not only to play the right notes, but to come in at the right time and to be on key. The end product is not just dependent on everyone doing their jobs. It’s dependent on everyone doing their jobs *together*.

Paul says that churches are the same way. In what is, no doubt one of the most famous and most instructive pieces of scripture in the Bible, Paul compares the Church to the human body. Thousands if not millions of intricate parts perform a carefully choreographed dance that results in the miracle of human life. And if any one of those parts quits, fails or is removed, the whole thing could come crashing down.

We all have bodies and we all know what happens when parts of our bodies don’t work right so comparing the church to a body is actually a pretty good comparison. Paul was not the first to think of it though. In comparing the church to a body, Paul draws upon a simile already prominent in the first century. Lee Barrett, who teaches at Lancaster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, writes that this comparison of the human community to the body had long been a feature of classical literature. But Paul gave it a new “revolutionary twist.”

“Previously,” Barret writes, “the comparison had reinforced hierarchy, suggesting that the lowly workers, the drones, should obey and support their ... leaders. Those at the bottom of the social ladder should stay put and be grateful for the

guidance and protection of their natural superiors. After all, in the body, the brain that makes crucial decisions is more critical than the lowly organs that sustain routine daily functioning.”¹

But Paul tells us that this hierarchical understanding doesn’t work in Christ’s church. We can’t *all* be the hearts and brains because the body still needs to breathe and eat and process food and deliver nutrients to the cells and fight off infections and run from predators and work the television remote. We can’t all be hearts and brains. It just wouldn’t be practical. The church can’t function that way.

Done. End of sermon, right? If we stop now, you could probably get to lunch before the Methodists. Except that there’s more.

Paul’s message is not just to those who want to be glory hounds; those who want the important jobs, the accolades, the attention and praise for being critical to the life of the church. He’s talking to the ones who play small, too. He’s offering a word of challenge to those who look at the rest of the church and say “I have nothing to offer. My role here is not important. If I shrink back in the shadows, no one will miss me.” Because if enough people think that way, the body will die. What Paul argues is that the smaller parts; the seemingly inconsequential parts; the parts with no glory are just as important.

“Oh, come now,” you might say. “You’re pulling my leg.” Don’t try to tell me that things like eyelashes, fingernails and toes are important. I know better.” And in this era when people freely and openly question traditional news sources and hard science, I guess I should expect as much. But check this out.

Eyelashes protect your eyes from dust and other particles.² Which may not seem like a big deal, unless you get dust in your eyes while driving 75mph down the freeway. And, fingernails protect the tips of your fingers. But they also enable an “extended precision grip” to help you pick up small items like your heart pills, and they “act as a counterforce.”³ When your finger pushes against something, the fingernail provides resistance so you can actually feel what you’re touching. And toes are not just attached to your feet to help you find your living room furniture in the dark. Toes provide traction and help us to maintain our balance and, according to some researchers, toes help us to run more efficiently like gears in a car.⁴

“Well then what about the appendix?” someone might logically ask. The appendix is one of the most maligned parts of the human body. For years people have been taking them out willy-nilly because they don’t do anything except get infected and cause appendicitis. But there are lots of good bacteria in your digestive system and a study from 2012 suggests that the appendix maintains an important “stockpile [of these] good bacteria that helps our intestines function.”⁵

Check and mate, Mr. Cynical-appendix-hater.

No matter how tiny the part, or seemingly inconsequential its job, the millions of parts of the human body are all important to the body’s health and proper function. We would be foolish to regard any of them as unimportant. And that, argues Paul, is what the church is like: a group of different parts that come together to serve a purpose; that all contribute to life; that are all necessary and vital to one another.

And while all those body parts are important, they are nothing if they don’t work together. Your body is not just made up of organs, those organs form systems that work together to support life. Your stomach, for instance, is an amazing organ. I remember one of my college instructors telling our class that the acid in your stomach could eat a bus if you could get one down there. Not that you would want to, but how about one of those giant crème puffs at Schmidt’s? Those are amazing, but good luck getting one of those into your stomach in piece. In fact, most of what you see when you walk the aisles at Kroger is not meant to be swallowed whole. And that’s where your mouth and teeth and saliva glands come in. They break those big things down into smaller pieces. Then, once those smaller bits reach your stomach, acid breaks them down further and passes them on to your small and large intestine where the pancreas, liver and gall bladder all supply fluids that help break down nutrients in what you eat so they can be sent all over the body.

The wonder of the human body is not just that individual organs do unique tasks. It’s that those organs work together in systems and those systems work together to compose a living body and those bodies design and build and create and nurture. Those bodies perform life-giving tasks, both heroic and mundane. And when you bring those bodies, those human lives together, you begin to see the image of God who created them.

You see what Paul is getting at here is not just that we need one another to accomplish the work of the church. He means that we need each other to be whole. Every part needs every other part to thrive. Just like your group project, if everyone doesn’t do their assignment, the whole group fails.

For example, it's not enough that we contribute financially if we can't put those contributions to work. Money is great, but without people to put it to use it doesn't do us any good. We can buy all the curriculum in the world, but without someone to teach the class, what good does it do?

And we can collect all the non-perishable food in Columbus and bring it to church with us on FOOD Sundays, but if there is no one to take that food down to CRC or NNEMAP or one of the food pantries who can distribute it to those in need, those contributions are pointless.

And in a day when the world is hurting; where our differences seem to divide us more than ever; where the struggle to survive leaves so many people feeling wounded and alone, the world needs to hear the good news of God's grace, mercy, and steadfast love. The world needs to know about God's openness and acceptance of all God's children. The world needs people to act on that good news in courageous and compassionate ways. But if we who come here to this holy place to hear that good news don't share it in the world, who will?

This church is the body of Christ and *all* of its parts must function well for the body to be healthy and active. We do no one, not our God, not our church and not ourselves, any favors by pretending that either our gifts are unimportant or that the body can do just fine without us.

The Bible is literally filled with seemingly unqualified people doing their part to fulfill God's will. Rahab was a prostitute.⁶ Mary was a peasant girl from a backwater town in Palestine.⁷ The disciples were fishermen⁸ and one was a tax collector.⁹ David was too young and too small.¹⁰ Saul (Paul) was a persecutor of Christians.¹¹ Amos was a dresser of sycamore trees.¹² Moses had a speech impediment,¹³ and he murdered a guy, too.¹⁴ These were all people who we would probably see as inadequate for the work of God's church. And what's more, they were people who could have easily seen themselves the same way and shrunk from what they were being called to do and be. But they didn't.

Life, the church, this is all a big group project. God designed it that way. You don't have to be good at *everything*, you don't even have to be good at *anything*. You just have to be willing to do *something*. We depend on it. The work of the church, our community and our personal well-being, it all depends on each one of us playing our role, doing our part. And when we decide to sit out, when we decide we have nothing to offer or that what we have to offer isn't good enough, the church is diminished.

It is human nature to think that what we have to offer isn't enough. But Paul tells us that by the power of God's Holy Spirit, it *is* enough. And more than that, what you have to offer is *exactly* what the body of Christ needs.

And *that's* the sermon. Enjoy your lunch.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Barrett, Lee C. "1 Corinthians 12:12-31a, Theological Perspective." *Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C Volume 1*. Ed. David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown. Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009. 278. Print.

² "The Eyelashes." *Vision Eye Institute*. Vision Eye Institute, n.d. Web. 03 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.visioneyeinstitute.com.au/eyelashes/>>.

³ "Nail (Anatomy): Function." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 03 Nov. 2014. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nail_\(anatomy\)#Function](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nail_(anatomy)#Function)>.

⁴ Zimmer, Carl. "The Purpose of Toes." *Discover Magazine* Feb. 1995: n. pag. *Discover Magazine*. Kalmbach Publishing Company, 1 Feb. 1995. Web. 03 Nov. 2014. <<http://discovermagazine.com/1995/feb/thepurposeoftoes476>>.

⁵ Murdoch, Cassie. "Oops! Looks Like You Might Need Your Appendix After All." *Jezebel*. Gawker Media, 5 Mar. 2012. Web. 03 Nov. 2014. <<http://jezebel.com/5890422/oops-looks-like-you-might-need-your-appendix-after-all>>.

⁶ Joshua 2:1-21, 6:17-25, NRSV

⁷ Luke 1:26-56, NRSV

⁸ Mark 1:14-20, NRSV

⁹ Mark 2:14, NRSV

¹⁰ 1st Samuel 17:33, NRSV

¹¹ Acts 7:59-8:2, NRSV

¹² Amos 7:14, NRSV

¹³ Exodus 4:10-17, NRSV

¹⁴ Exodus 2:11-15, NRSV