

“It’s About the Body”

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-21; 27

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¹² For 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. ¹³ For 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.

¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If 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. ¹⁶ And 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. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”...²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

It’s about the body. The “it” is the way we respond to God’s grace. The “it” is the way we grow in our faith. The “it” is the journey of our faith. The body is Paul’s identification of the church as the body of Christ.

Paul’s words to troubled church in the Greek city of Corinth are not old and moldy, dry and out-of-date. The metaphor of the body is not a difficult one to grasp; but it has been said one of the greatest distances to bridge is from knowing to living. Ask anyone who is ever been on diet: you know the right thing...the greatest distance to bridge is the move from knowing to living.

It is about the body! Whatever else I say today that makes sense to you, if that sense is not lived...practiced...embodied, then the seed of faith has fallen on concrete pad and there can be no rooting in the ground and growing into beauty. It’s about the body. Now, if you have read or heard much from the letters of the apostle Paul in our Bible, you would probably agree that Paul does not appear to have much of sense of humor. Serious! But I cannot help but think that Paul is having some fun here.

Let’s see, so if my hand said because I cannot eat like the mouth can, I am just not part of the body. If my ears said, “I really would like run a marathon, but since I can’t, I am off the team.” Paul is being silly. Silly about that basic envy that captures us all...that basic sense of seeing what others have to offer and forgetting our own part...that knowing all the things that other parts of the body can do and diminishing what we can do.

You have heard that confession is good for the soul, let me tell you I envy some of church staff members. I envy that Tim Moe and Susan Read can make music that way they do. I wish I could...I pretend I can...but I can't and will not be able to. I envy the way that Tammy Winchip, our educator, can organize and strategize. She sees a process for how do things (it's often a jumble to me). And who can light up this pulpit anymore than Laura Smith Conrad! She just shines. And Mike Sorrell can listen, and listen, and listen. I have to talk. Debbie Wright, our church administrator, cares passionately for how things are run around here. I get fed up and go home...while she still working the details. That's just the program staff of this church, a few parts of the body. Sometimes I am just the belly button gathering lint!

Now, envy of another person's gifts and sensing what you cannot do is no excuse in the body. So what if the ear cannot run a marathon...so what if the big toe cannot smell...so what if the gall bladder cannot hear. It is about claiming your part in the body and serving.

The real heart of the matter (a good body metaphor!)...the real heart of the matter is not envy of what others can do and you cannot. No, the real heart of this matter is disconnection. Severed from a relationship to the body...like this hand in the jar. [Jar with life-size mannequin hand floating in it like a specimen jar.] Now I borrowed this idea for this visual from another preacher...it sure got my attention. What makes this hand gross is that it severed...that it is disconnected. This hand came from a mannequin. If you saw the full mannequin, clothed, and in store display, there would be nothing gross at all. It's the disconnection which bothers us.

So what connects us? Certainly there are many past ways of connection that are going, gone, and past. There used to be the day when the membership of Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church lived in a one-mile radius to church. Technically, on a snow day, we could hold worship because so many could, if they set their mind to it, walk a mile. Now that circle is 10 or 15 miles or more. We are not a neighborhood church.

Then consider our baccalaureate services for high school students: basically, we use to only need one color for the robes: purple for Northwestern. Now it is fast approaching a tri-color of South Pointe, Rock Hill High, Northwestern, with a smattering of Clover, York, Fort Mill, and I apologize for those I am missing.

If you walk through our parking lot, the political bumper stickers are divided between red and blue (how easily we have fallen into coloring the political divisions of Democrats and Republicans). Fifty years ago was a time when there was basically only one political party in South Carolina.

When some of you look at the new pictorial directory, you will be reminded that we are a different congregation than we were five years ago; and these are just some of the external disconnections.

Coming off last week's sermon that worship is central to our being, worship complements the body but does not support the body finally. Worship is like the blood flowing in the veins of the

body...but worship is not the skeleton, the structure, the foundation of the body. Worship helps but finally does not hold members together.

Let's say you to decide to test the worship connection in a church our size. I have had folks tell me that they have quit coming in order to see if their absence will be missed (folks, that's a bit passive-aggressive). You can get away with that at 11:00 a.m. service. You can be gone for weeks, months, even years people will not notice. I will not notice. I can't. For example, I have dropped out Rotary Club over three years ago and still have people say to me: "See you at Rotary." I haven't been in over three years!

Now at the 8:45 a.m. service, it's a little more difficult to disappear, but you can. Our Second Sunday service is not established well enough to say definitively but any service that draws over 100 people is easy to drop out of. In fact, I suspect the only worship service at Oakland that is intentional about connections is the 8:55 worship service in the Fellowship Hall. They keep up with each other. That service is very intentional about being the body that is connected. Worship alone will not keep you connected.

How about the pastors...will they keep you connected? Those who have studied church sizes have found that a pastor can keep up with about a 150-member congregation—a church without large program demands. Beyond 150 members, the time constraints mean that the depth relationship is not feasible. Let see, with almost three pastors (remember Laura's position is almost full time) and with lots of program responsibility, your pastoral staff at best could have a depth relationship with 450 members. That's about the max we could handle and that would mean that over 450 would be neglected completely. The confirmed membership of Oakland is more than double 450, and that's not counting all the baptized children.

Where is pastoral care going to happen best at Oakland? Member to member. Like the old spiritual put it: the ankle bone's connected to shin bone, the shin bone's connected to the knee bone! The best pastoral care happens member to member in groups such as Disciple Class, a Sunday School class, a choir, Stephen Ministers, Women's Circle, a group with an enthusiastic purpose or mission.

Now if you are new to this faith journey or new to Oakland, let me tell that there will be times that faith will seem the least important thing in your life. Some times that you have other demands in your life: some very good demands, some benign demands; and some flesh-eating demands in your life. Here's my hunch: you have become disconnected. Some demand in your life has become more important than faith. Here's an absolute: I know a way to get the lift back. I know it...and you know it (or will) but the longest distance to bridge is move from knowledge to living.

Consider this: What if I told you that I wanted you to give up air-conditioning in the hot, humid summer in the South, work until your bones ache, give up cable television, eat mass-produced food, and live in close quarters with strangers. That's a description of most every mission trip that I have ever been on or have heard others speak about. But there is not much whining about

how hard the work is or how little progress is made or arguing about fine points of Presbyterian theology. No, what I have experienced and what I have found is that there is spirit that moves through the body, the group, that says: “We are alive and serving Jesus Christ; and we look after each other.”

What if I said, you are going to have read three or four hours a week material that will make a high school English class seem like a breeze. In addition to that, you are going to have come to a meeting once a week whether you feel like it or not. That’s describing a Disciple Bible Study or one of the other classes. We feel alive and serving Christ; and we look after each other.

What if I said, you are going have to speak in tongues, get told what to do and when to do it, and dress up in clothes that you did not pick out. In this age of positive affirmation, this is a group where you will get told you did something wrong and you have do it over again until you get it right. That’s describing the Chancel Choir. But making music...that sometimes stirs choir members. They feel alive and serving Christ; and this choir looks after each other.

Feeling that your faith is limping along? I am telling you it is disconnected. It has lost a group where they know your name and care for your life—a group that speaks the language of faith...where we are servants of Christ and not just friendly acquaintances.

It’s about the body. It is so much about the body that Apostle Paul slipped in a little surprise in his description of the church. There was surprise in the first line that I missed the first several times I read this passage. I thought I knew what it said. Here’s the first line of our reading; “For 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...” With what? What Paul should have said is so it is with the church. The church is like a body—that’s his point.

But sometimes Biblical writers do not do what they are supposed to do. Just as the body has members and all the members compose the body, so it is with...Christ. That’s what the man says! It is about these body members so connected to Christ, that we are Christ. The body is not a metaphor, or analogy, or nice object lesson for the church. No, it is much more. When we are part of this body, we are part of Christ. We are in Christ and of Christ. It is about the body...about being in Christ.

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The biggest divide in our lives is the move from what we know to what we live. Paul says: “It is about the body.” It is about being connected. [Holding up the jar with the hand in it] Yeah, this hand is gross. It is disconnected. How about you?