

Sermon: Strength in our Differences
Text: I Corinthians 12:12-31
Date: May 1, 2022
Location: Northwest Community Church

INTRODUCTION

The human body is an amazingly complex organism. The body has 100 trillion cells, 206 bones, 600 muscles, 22 internal organs, 900 ligaments, 4000 tendons, 11 different systems like the respiratory and digestive systems that all work together. Scripture says that you are wonderfully made and that is so true.

Let's stand for just a second. Listen, did you hear that? That is the sound of your body at work. Millions of nerve signals are being sent to your muscles right now. You are using 300 muscles just to stand still and balance yourself. Now let's step in place. I feel like an aerobics instructor! It takes 40 muscles for you to lift your leg and altogether takes 200 muscles to walk. You can sit down. Let me see you all smile. You just used 17 muscles. Let me see you frown. You just used 43 muscles. Your face is full of muscles. In fact it takes 146 muscles to kiss. If you want a great workout then find someone to kiss today!

Let's all look at our biceps. Muscles can only pull on the bones. They can't push. So to straighten your arm back out you need the tricep muscle found in your underarm. Isn't God amazing to think of how he worked all of this out.

In our passage today, Paul makes a strong statement. In fact, it's a strong theological statement. He says in verse 27 that we are the body of Christ and each one of us is a part of it.

Think about that for a moment. The hands of Christ are no longer here, but we are his hands that can touch and heal. The feet of Christ are no longer here, but we are the feet that can carry good news to the world. The ears of Christ are no longer here, but we can hear the cries of the hurting and oppressed. The eyes of Christ are no longer here, but we can see those who are lost and dying without a Savior. And finally, the Holy Spirit that resided in Jesus during his time on earth we are told now lives within us.

You are One Pixel in the Image of Christ

Did you know that if you were to print out an image on a regular sheet of paper, you would have over two million pixels or color dots on a single page. At a high resolution it could go up to 8 million dots. Sometimes if we order a poster or a banner for the church we will get a message back from the printer saying that the resolution is too low and causing the image and words to be distorted. So think for a minute if we were printing a picture of Jesus. The more pixels we use, the more legible the image. If we were to zoom in so that we could see each pixel we would see that in a color image, every pixel looks different. But if we start reducing the pixels the image gets distorted. Pretty soon in fact, the image of Jesus would not be recognizable. It gets even more unrecognizable when we limit the color palette to just a narrow band of colors.

If you get what I am about to tell you it will revolutionize how you think about your faith. A lot of us have this Jesus and me mentality when it comes to our faith. Even before the pandemic, being active in a community of faith has declined drastically over the last 20 years. But, most people still say they pray and most believe in God and think Jesus is great. They just don't see any need to be active in a Faith community.

So, more and more this is what we are showing the world. It's an image of Christ that is nothing more than a disconnected group of pixels. Would anybody be able to see Jesus in that picture?

In a parallel passage in Romans 12, Paul writes:

So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. Romans 12:5

But that is not all that Paul is saying. He is also saying that the world needs more than a monochrome version of Jesus. Just imagine if every picture of Jesus was just pixels in different shades of blue, or shades of red. It's not a very compelling image.

And right now the church is trying to show the world a picture of Jesus but we have a pixel problem. So they look at the image of Jesus we want to project and all they see is a fuzzy image because our resolution is so low and we refuse to come together. Or, they see the image of Christ that Dr. King was concerned about - all of these monochrome versions. That monochrome version is interesting, but we have lost the beauty of the Savior along the way. We've lost the beauty of the Savior when the 11 o'clock hour is still the most segregated hour in the week.

Paul has been talking about gifts, but now he is talking about our social and ethnic differences. There were huge differences between a Jew and a Gentile. There were language and culture differences. Jews saw Gentiles as perpetually unclean so they would never share a water fountain or a church pew with them. The Gentiles saw Jews as zealots who thought wearing the right clothes and eating and drinking the right foods and drinks earned God's favor.

Then add another layer of social and financial differences. There were those who were so poor that they literally sold themselves into slavery to pay off their debts. So on the night of the church gatherings, the slave can't leave until the boss is done with them. Then they rush to the gathering to eat supper with the family of God but those who are doing okay and telecommuting from home in their pajamas showed up two hours earlier and ate all of the bread, vegetables and meat. Moments later they pick up the bread and cup and share communion and act like they are one big happy family. And Paul cries foul in the last chapter. You can't say you are one in Christ but then act like some of your family are less important or don't matter!

So Paul tells us that God is inviting us to bring our true authentic selves and our story and find our place in this beautiful image of the Savior. Come and be a part of the body of Christ and let the world see the beauty of the Savior in all of its brilliant colors... in all of its complexities and paradoxes.

But, now watch this. Jesus said in John 17 that when the world sees this new identity. When they see all of the parts coming together to form his body, the world will believe in who Jesus is.

Are you surrendering yourself to be a part of this beautiful image of Jesus by being a pixel in the family of God?

You Belong

If you are thinking that bringing together all of these different people is a recipe for problems then you would be correct. Community is wonderful but it also messy.

In the Corinthian church there were those who thought their role in the church was superior. There were those saying that they could teach better than Paul. That they were spiritually mature because of their experience of speaking in tongues. If they were comparing themselves to Paul you can imagine how they were comparing themselves to each other.

Sin is really just taking the good gifts of God, including spiritual gifts, and distorting them. I have yet to think of a sin that didn't start out as something God intended for our good but we distorted it. Our spiritual gifts can be used as weapons to make others feel inferior. It can also make us feel superior when it comes to serving.

Ultimately, Paul is saying that you belong in God's family. Maybe you have always felt odd or different. Maybe you didn't grow up in church and you still don't really know what to say when we say the Lord's prayer together. The only time you would sing with a hundred people in public would be on a karaoke night after a few drinks. And maybe you can't find every book of the Bible and don't know what to say when you pray.

First, it's okay if you feel different. God doesn't want us all to be the same. He goes through this whole object lesson in our text and says if the whole body were an eye or an ear we would be in trouble.

We even have little sayings based on this premise. We drop something and say I am just all thumbs. We trip and stumble and say I've always had two left feet. When someone does something dumb we call them a butt-head!

God doesn't want his body to be all thumbs, to have two left feet or to be a butt-head. Every part of the body is needed.

And Paul pushes it even further and says its those parts that are weaker that we treat with special honor. So let me give a word of caution to those listening today that have gotten pretty good at doing this church thing. So when someone shows up that you judge as weaker or maybe even unpresentable, Paul says wait a second... Those are the ones within the body that you give a little more TLC to. You don't judge and shun and talk about them, you try even harder to love those who don't feel like they fit.

I couldn't read this passage without thinking about the special needs community. The body of Christ has really struggled to say in word and action to those with special needs that you belong. You matter. A few years ago I wrestled with the theology of baptizing someone who may never be able to fully comprehend the work of Christ or verbalize it. This wasn't a situation I was prepared for. And it occurred to me that baptism is really about saying you belong here...you belong and are part of God's family. So we do baptize those who are willing to be baptized in the special needs community. And if we believe what Paul is saying – that you also have something to contribute to the body of Christ no matter your level of mobility or speech or cognitive ability.

God wants you to know today that you belong. It's okay to feel different, but don't feel inferior. You are loved here at Northwest and you are loved in God's family.

We Need Each Other

I love that word interdependent. It means that we are mutually dependent upon each other. Like how your muscles depend on each other one to pull this way and the other that way. In our passage, Paul in essence is saying that you and I need each other in our purpose and in our pain.

IN OUR PURPOSE

The underlying assumption in I Corinthians 12 is that we as the body of Christ have work to do. If the body of Christ is alive then we have work to do. We have work to do in sharing who Jesus is with a world that is

searching for hope. We have work to do in loving God and loving each other. To do that work, God has given us all different kinds of gifts. Paul says in verse 28

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.

I like the Message paraphrase of verse 18-20

What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its proper place. No part is important on its own.

We need each other. These are all gifts that help the church spread the good news of Jesus and gifts that help care for each other. But if you are going to accomplish your purpose, you are going to need others around you that are accomplishing their purpose as well. Paul goes on to say – do we all carry ALL of these gifts. No! The gifts have been spread and those gifts compliment and strengthen each other. I like the Message paraphrase of verse 18-20

What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its proper place. No part is important on its own.

WE NEED EACH OTHER IN OUR PAIN

Finally, Paul says that as a body we suffer and celebrate together.

I'm discovering this lately after I tore a ligament back at Easter. I know I've already whined to you about it! But it's only one ligament out of the 900. Logic would make me think that I could do without it... I've got 899 more! But that one ligament affected my exercise routine which affected the rest of my body. That one ligament gave me months of excuses to sit on the couch.

Paul writes that

We should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. I Corinthians 12:25b-26

We will all at some time or another experience deep levels of suffering. None of us wants to suffer in seclusion. We need the support and encouragement of others to make it through.

We will all at some time experience moments of celebration that we will want to share. There's nothing worse than having really good news and no one to share it with.

Here's something that we all get. You can't build relationships of mutual concern, support and celebration on a few minutes contact in the church lobby. It has to come through spending intentional times with other believers. I met with our leaders this past week and we were talking about zoom fatigue. Many of our small groups are struggling to keep their momentum during a time when we are all so depleted. So I want to encourage you to think outside of the box. Keep trying because it is important. So maybe that means changing your meeting schedule or being creative in ways that will bring life to you and your relationships.

CONCLUSION

As I was preparing those photographs of Jesus, I noticed when I zoomed in just all of the different shades of color pixels that make up his face. When I was close to my monitor it just looked like a blur of squares. But when I stepped away from my computer and came back several feet away, I saw Jesus looking back at me.

It occurs to me that when we are in a community of faith, we might feel like we don't matter. We might feel like it's messy and wonder if this really looks like Christ.

But Jesus prayed in John 17:20-26 that we would be one...that we would come together because when the world looks at us from a distance we together will reflect the image of Christ.

You are part of that image. You are important. You matter. You have a purpose in the body of Christ. You belong.

As we come to the Lord's table today it is a reminder that you are a part and we all belong.