

Trinity United Methodist Church

January 17, 2021

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 (NIV)

12 Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. **13** For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. **14** Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

15 Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. **16** And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. **17** If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? **18** But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. **19** If they were all one part, where would the body be? **20** as it is, there are many parts, but one body. **21** The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” **22** On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, **23** and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, **24** while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, **25** so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. **26** If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. **28** And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. **29** Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? **30** Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? **31** Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Open our ears and our hearts, oh Lord. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

One of the things that I'm actually grateful to COVID and the pandemic for is that the gym hasn't gotten overpopulated with all the New Year's resolutioners like it usually does this time of year. It's been nice to continue to work at exercising without the newbies that come in and stand around and chitchat around all the weights and machines. It's like, "Um, are you going to do something? Or are you going to get out of the way so I can do work?"

But every year around this time whenever you see newbies at the gym, particularly around weights, there's some typical newbie mistakes that are made, that I made when I was first getting started. And one of the cardinal rules when it comes to weightlifting is, don't skip the legs. Don't skip leg day. There's decent enough reasons to do so, because especially a newbie, we want to focus on the muscles that are usually seen, especially muscles that are shown off in ads and media and so forth—the chest, the arms and so forth. Working for that beach bod and whatever the case might be.

But also, if you work the legs like you're really supposed to, after a good leg day they feel absolutely like Jello afterwards. And who in the world would willingly inflict that on themselves?

But along with that, I see newbies who don't work all the body parts. Many times in the gym you'll see somebody who's doing nothing but chest presses and bicep curls all day long. And that's all they ever do. They want the big, thick arms like Arnold Schwarzenegger, so all they're doing is working the bicep, forgetting that it's actually the tricep that gives just as much definition to the arm as that bicep does. But they don't work that part. Or they're only working the chest and never working the back.

And the thing of that is, you continue down that path and one of two things are going to happen, if not both. Number one, you start looking funny. We go to Busch Gardens and oftentimes stop into Subway there outside the gate. We made one of these stops on one occasion and ran into one such example. It was obvious this man had been working out just his upper body and his legs were just as skinny as could be. He looked way out of proportion. He looked silly. So *that* happens if you don't work the body like you're supposed to.

But not only that; you set yourself up for injury. For instance, I've been going back to the chiropractor lately, because by the end of Sunday morning after standing all morning, I've been realizing, "Gosh, my lower back is getting to me." Come to find out,

it's because of weak core muscles. I hate working the core. It's one of those exercises I'm not fond of doing. So because one area is weak, the other areas suffer as well.

My therapist that I saw in Northern Virginia also saw one of the Redskins football players. I mean, let's face it, if you played for the Washington football team, you might need therapy, too. (Hey, there's always next year, right?) But this football player said, "You know why we lift so heavy in the weight room, right? It's not just to get bigger so we can block better and hit harder and run faster. It's injury prevention, so that when we get hit and when we fall to the ground on top of each other, hard—joints and bones and things stay in place like they're supposed to, because the muscles around them are in tip-top shape, holding them in place."

The best lifts and exercises are the ones that work multiple body parts together at the same time, that get it all working together like it should be.

So in today's reading from scripture, from 1 Corinthians, we get one of Paul's best-known metaphors for the church, the body of Christ. And Paul didn't come up with this metaphor on his own. It was a well-known piece of rhetoric in ancient times, used by some of the best orators that would speak to the public in the town squares. They talked about society as a human body, but usually in such a way that emphasized not only that each part had its part to play, but each was to stay in its place, also. So if you were one of the lesser parts of society—say, a slave or a servant—play your part, and don't you dare be thinking that you can ever be as important as one of the greater parts of society. It was meant as a way to keep the peace, a false sense of peace; to keep the status quo.

But when Paul applies this metaphor to the church, the church in Corinth was an absolute mess. You can easily read through the first letter to the Corinthians this week at home. You think churches today have issues? That church was an absolute mess. Plenty of the members thought that they could live their lives however they wanted to rather than really leaning into and learning and living by the ways of Jesus. Many of them thought that they were better and more important than other, lesser members of the church. Just like they were in the society around them.

But here Paul says, not so. He twists this metaphor used by politicians of the day to keep people in their place when he says, "Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it." He says, "the feet are just as important as the hands. The ears are just as important as the eyes."

One time in a church after preaching on this passage, a member came up to me and said, "Pastor, sometimes I feel like I might be the appendix of the body of Christ." This kind of useless part that just kind of hangs out until one day it gets inflamed and has to be cut out. But recent research has shown that even that organ that we thought was just left over from the days when we were cave people and eating vastly different diets

than we do in modern times, the appendix still actually plays a part in our human bodies. It holds good bacteria that is slowly released into our digestive system when our bacteria balance gets out of whack there. And so even the appendix has a part to play.

Paul further draws on an ever more rudimentary understanding of biology. He says if one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

N.T. Wright points it out this way: He asks, “Have you ever had a toothache?” Like a really, really bad toothache? And you know how small your teeth are individually. But boy, when that tooth gets to hurting, it feels like it’s the size of your head, sometimes. Good luck thinking about anything else but that. And it’s not the tooth itself that’s hurting, but it’s the root underneath that is inflamed, right? And have you ever looked at that root after it’s maybe been pulled out by your dentist? It’s truly one of the smallest parts in our bodies. But boy, when it suffers, the rest of us suffer along with it, don’t we?

Alternatively, N.T. Wright points out that “music falls on our ear. Our ears are how we listen to music. But have you ever listened to a piece of music that is so beautiful that it brought you to tears?” Or maybe the message of the lyrics was so powerful that it brought you to tears?

If you think about that from a strictly biological aspect, you might ask yourself, “Well, wait a minute. I’m hearing this stuff, so why are my eyes watering? What’s going on here?” Or maybe like the song this morning that Becky recorded and sang for us, maybe music that gets your toe tapping and your head bobbing before you even realize that that’s what you’re doing, right? And you think, “Why am I doing that?” When one part is honored and is happy, the other parts are happy as well. The warmth of the sun falls on the face, but it permeates and spreads through the entire body.

Paul points out that in the body of Christ, as in the cross of Christ, all of these parts are equal. None is more important than the other. And in fact, for the body to be healthy and to function like it’s supposed to, all need to be equal. But to what end?

Again, Paul is talking about being the church, about being the covenant people of God. In recent weeks we’ve looked at the differences between covenants and contracts. Covenants are all about relationships. And covenants stipulate that even if you don’t hold up your end of the covenant, I or we will hold up ours. Because God is a covenant God, God chose to make that covenant with His people, with us, and reaffirms that covenant over and over throughout scripture. Ultimately in the New Covenant, the New Testament, and in Jesus Christ.

In that New Testament, that new covenant, Paul in many of his writings draws parallels to how the church is like the Israelites in the Old Testament, God's chosen people. Chosen to be covenant people with the world around them. Blessed to be a blessing, which we talked about last week.

And here Paul speaks about both the unity and the diversity of the church. To live as covenant people with God, with all those around us, and with each other. How does this covenant play out within the body of Christ?

Imagine with me for a moment as we continue to explore this metaphor: If a part of our body said, "You know what? I've served long enough. I've done my time"—you hear that in church?—"It's time someone else does theirs. I'm out. I'm done." Imagine if a part of your body said that. For many of us, parts of our bodies *have* said that, right? Our knees? I said at 9:30, y'all get knee replacements in this church like a dime a dozen, it seems like. Something in the water in this area or something. Or other joints or something.

For me, it was my pancreas. It said, "I'm done. Peace out. Shoot yourself with insulin from now on." But it's truly when one part suffers, the whole body suffers with it. It wasn't my pancreas that one day up and decided to quit me; it was a virus that I got somehow, that the autoimmune response attacked the pancreas and killed it. So without that pancreas, because it suffered, the rest of me could literally die because of that one suffering part.

Now imagine with me further. If the rest of my organs said, "Well, that's great. Pancreas up and quit on us, and that's so demoralizing. You know, I'm done too. The heart says, "You know, I'm done. I'm done pumping. That's it." Or other organs were to say, "You know what? Selfish pancreas, taking a time out. I deserve that too, so I'm going to shut down as well." Of course, the human body doesn't do that. In fact, because my pancreas is shut down, some of my other organs actually work overtime sometimes. Like my kidneys, filtering out toxins when my sugar goes high and stays high for any length of time. My heart, thankfully, keeps on ticking. My brain, well, that remains to be seen. Depends on the day.

Paul says that's the way it's supposed to be in the church. It's like the human body has a covenant within itself, doesn't it? Where the human body says even if one part of the body suffers, we're not going to give up. In fact, we're going to compensate for it. That even if one part of the body up and quits on us, the rest of the parts are going to keep going. That covenant. Even if one part doesn't hold up, the rest of the parts will.

It's like the human body was *designed* in a covenant relationship even within itself. I wonder who did that?

Paul says that's the way it is to be with the church, with the covenant people in the body of Christ.

And so to that end I share with you parts two and three of our Strategic Plan as we head into this new year together. Remember, our Vision is **“to be a vibrant community that reflects the Kingdom of God through love and service to one another.”** And our Mission is **“to be a witness to Jesus Christ and the community by building authentic relationships and leading through impactful service.”**

We talked last week about ways in which we're seeking to deepen connections within our community, to seek the *shalom* of our town and our county and beyond. And so today I share with you goals #2 and #3 of our Strategic Plan.

The second is *to empower and equip the congregation to serve*. One of the ways in which we're going to seek to do that is by helping all of us to discern and explore what are our spiritual gifts. How have each of us been uniquely gifted by the Holy Spirit to serve in the body of Christ?

Many times the way that nominations works in discerning the leadership of the church is, we meet in the fall of the year and we look at the report and see what needs to be changed. And we say, “All right, three people have rotated off of Staff Parish. We need three new people on there. Who's that person that sits near the front row, usually with so-and-so? They come to 11:00. Which side of the church? Maybe thumb through the directory...Oh, that's so-and-so. They need to get involved; let's ask them to be on a vital committee of the church.” Right?

I always remember the story of a church that had a CFO as one of its members. A Chief Financial Officer was their job in a major company in the community. So guess what position they asked that guy to serve in? Finance Chair, right? And the guy actually said back to them, “No. I don't want to do that. That's my job. My spiritual gift is teaching, and I feel called, actually, to teach little kids.” So he taught a fifth-grade Sunday school class, and that turned out to be one of the biggest classes because he lived into his spiritual gifting.

What I have found through years of ministry is that when we get people in the right seats, in the right positions on the bus due to spiritual gifting, is when things really start happening.

Another way this happens is, there are those of us that see the “big picture.” Man, we can see a forest better than just about anybody else. We can see that big picture. But the shadow side of that is, “Oh. A forest has trees in it? What?” So there is the spiritual gift of administration. That's actually a spiritual gift, and some of y'all have it. So we say we need a big-idea person who has these gifts on this kind of job, but that

person alone isn't going to get anything done. They're full of ideas, and that's largely where things stay. We need to pair them up with somebody gifted in administration, and lo and behold, *that's* when things really start clicking and where things really start happening. That's one of the ways in which we're going to be seeking to equip the congregation to serve here at Trinity. *Living into our spiritual gifts.*

Also, I remind us: This is a three- to five-year plan. So these are works in progress. You'll see things start happening, but it's not going to be necessarily next week. Not overnight.

Thirdly, *to build congregational unity.* In the feedback that we received as part of the process last year, many, many people, and actually without even asking, identified themselves as, "I'm an 8:30 service person." "I'm a 9:30 Rivers of Life person." "I'm an 11:00 person." And let me tell you: Good luck getting some of you 11:00'ers to go to the Rivers of Life Service. And good luck getting some of those hardcore, committed—I mean, let's face it, you know the level of commitment you've got to have to show up at church at 8:30 every single Sunday morning? I was slightly dismayed when we began discussing starting the 8:30 service back... You've got to be committed, and those people are *committed* to that service. And the point of it is, it's okay to have our preferences, but it shouldn't be where we derive our identity from as a member here at Trinity. We want to build initiatives where we say, "You know what? I'm a member/participant/involved in Trinity United Methodist Church, and I *happen to attend* the 11:00 service, or I *happen to attend* one of the other services. Or sometimes, depending on what I've got going on for the day, I go to a different one."

We're looking to unify the congregation through initiatives and events. This is really where we could use all the brainstorming possibilities within the congregation. If you have any kind of ideas of how we might go about getting all three services together during this time of COVID, we are all ears for that. We still might say, "Whoa, that's a little crazy." There's that caveat, right? But we're all ears still.

Many people said in the feedback that they would love to see the Wednesday night dinners return, but we can't do that. We can't have good old-fashioned potlucks during this time; those typical ways in which we seek to foster unity in the church. So if you have any ideas, please, certainly let me know. Let church council know. We'll be happy to brainstorm with you and explore that together.

I know that you have been told before, in a larger church like ours with three different worshiping services, that some have previously had the philosophy that we are three different churches that meet in the same building on Sunday morning. I, your current pastor, do not believe in that. I believe we are better together and that we are

indeed all part of the body of Christ here at Trinity, united together. So how can we foster that together?

Overall, the whole point of it is: How do we live as covenant people, in covenant with God, our community, and each other? How do we work at building our strength as the body of Christ, with all the parts working together and even working for injury prevention as we stand against the wiles of the devil, right?

At the end of this chapter, Paul has a sentence that wasn't included in today's reading. He says, "And yet I will show you the most excellent way." And he launches into what we know as 1 Corinthians 13, "the *love* chapter," often read at weddings. But it has absolutely nothing to do with romantic love; it's love that holds people together. It holds us together as covenant people with a covenant God. Agape love; that means unconditional, just like a covenant. *I promise to love you in such a way that even if you do your worst to me, I will still love you.* That's a promise God makes with us, we make with each other.

In the Old Testament it has been said, God's steadfast, unconditional love that never runs out on us, no matter how many times we run away from Him. So how do we live into that covenant? How do we, indeed, build that strength, and work together?

I am excited, again, for what lies ahead for us as we explore together, as we work on these various parts of the plan together. As we all do our part and pray for God to reveal to us, how are we gifted by God to play our part in making the body of Christ here at Trinity Church the healthiest that it's ever been and the most on fire that it's ever been for the cause of Jesus Christ?

Thanks be to God. Amen.