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1 Corinthians 12:12-31

21st Message

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THE SOURCE OF OUR SIGNIFICANCE

SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

Christians need frequent reminders of the radical nature of the church because many unbelievers have misconceptions about it. Some see the church as a collection of colorless religious dullards who gather on Sundays and sit with blank stares on their faces, never entertaining a serious thought and never caring enough about people to bother getting their hands dirty. Some regard the church as a group of religious bureaucrats who are forever pronouncing judgments that no one pays any attention to. There is probably some justification for these charges. The lifelessness of the church is what prompted the philosopher Nietzsche to say, "If you want me to believe in your Redeemer, you'll have to look a lot more redeemed."

Even among believers there are false ideas about the church. For instance, the church is not a building, although we perpetuate that notion in many ways. On occasion I will say to my family, "I need to run down to the church." What I mean is, I need to go to the church building. We have a sign out front that says "Peninsula Bible Church South," as if this building were the church, but it is not. God does not live here. The church is made up of people. We are the church. Peninsula Bible Church South meets here. The New Testament does use the metaphor of a building when it refers to the church, but it is referring not to bricks and mortar, but flesh and bones. The church is a temple made up of living stones. We are the body of Christ.

Buildings and bodies are different metaphors, but what they both have in common is that they are places to live in. The glory of the church is that it is the building in which God lives and the body through which he works. The church in the world is the manifestation of the life of Christ, which is still being manifested in the world, no longer through his physical body, but through a corporate body, the church.

The book of Acts opens with the words of Luke, "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach." Acts is really not a book about the acts of Christians, but about the continuing acts of Jesus. It is an account of what Jesus continues to do and teach. While he was on earth he did these things through his own physical body, but ever since he has been doing them through the bodies of men and women who are indwelt by his life. That is the church—men and women possessed by Jesus Christ, and manifesting his life every day. So the church is the body of Christ. It is not like a body. We are the body of Christ. We are the visible expression of Christ. Thus, when Paul was persecuting the early Christians, he heard on the Damascus road this question, "Why are you persecuting Me?"

And this is our theme this morning in our study in the apostle Paul's first Corinthian letter—the church as the body of Christ.

I. God's plan for the Body: Unity in diversity (12:12-13)

For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one

body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Cor 12:12-13 NASB)

Paul begins with a reminder that the body of Christ is very much like the human body: it consists of many different parts that work together and form one body. It is designed to work in a cooperative fashion, even when it is reluctant to do so. Yesterday was a long, tiring day for me. Kathy was attending a seminar, and I was taking care of our three boys. Normally that wouldn't have presented a problem, but two of them had basketball games. The first game was at 8:00 a.m., and the second one, which I coached, was at 4:00 p.m. In between, my eight-year-old had an outing to the beach. I had a wedding at 5:30 p.m., I preached here at 6:30, and then I returned to the wedding reception at 8:00. When my alarm rang this morning, many parts of my body protested. They didn't want to get up! But even though they were reluctant to function they didn't let me down; they didn't refuse and demand the right to more sleep. It is because the different parts of our bodies do not compete with one another. On the contrary, they cooperate with each other. Even when our bodies are hurt, the other parts immediately compensate and rush to their aid.

It is the same with the body of Christ, the church. Paul says, "For even as the body is one and yet has many members, ...so also is Christ." Notice he does not say what we would might expect, "so also is the church." That is because it is the church and Christ that make up the body of Christ. Our bodies are made up of two major sections, the head and the torso. The head is the control center; the members are all attached to it. Even our bodies are designed to teach us how the church is to function. It is essential that we understand that we are a part of Christ. We are the means by which Christ functions in the world. We all share the same life, and we are the means of expressing that life in this world. Whatever we are, we are by the power, presence and activity of our Lord. He is the one to whom all believers are joined. That is why one of Paul's favorite expressions to describe the church is those who are "in Christ." If they are different, it is because Christ is in them and they are in Christ. That is the important thing about the church, and why Paul speaks not about the church, but about Christ being the body to which we all belong.

How did we get into this body? How was this unity achieved? Paul tells us in verse 13: it was achieved when we were all baptized with one Spirit. He is referring to the OT prophecy of Joel, who said that a time was coming when God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh, not just the Jews. That is what John the Baptist meant when he said, "I baptize you with water, but one is coming who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." When the Messiah came, he would pour out his Spirit on all flesh. And when the Day of Pentecost came, that is exactly what happened. Peter quoted Joel's prophecy and said that this is what was predicted. The time had come.

That is what places individual believers in the body of Christ. The Lord Jesus pours out his Spirit upon you, and the Spirit indwells

you, so that now you are a part of the life of God. Everyone shares the same life. Notice the word all. It is not a matter of maturity. Remember this letter was addressed to a group of people who were badly divided into various cliques, and who were characterized by carnality and every kind of sin. Yet Paul says, “by one Spirit you are all baptized into one body.” That is what makes us one body, and that occurs whenever someone becomes a Christian. When you allow the Lord Jesus Christ to become Lord of your life and invite him to live inside you, you are baptized with the Holy Spirit. It is not something that occurs after your salvation, or something that happens later in your spiritual life because of some spiritual experience or other. It is not a second blessing. Maybe you have been asked the question, “Have you received the baptism of the Holy Spirit?” If you belong to Christ, your answer should be, yes.

We don't need something more from God to grow spiritually. We have everything we need. What we must do is lay hold of what we have: the Spirit of God resident within us, and his power available to us to be who we need to be in every situation, to cope with every demand in our life. It is not just the “super” spiritual Christians who have special resources and abilities. Everyone who belongs to Jesus Christ shares the life of God and is empowered by the Spirit of God.

II. The illustration of God's plan: Looking at the human body (12:14-26)

In verses 14-26, Paul elaborates on this theme of unity in diversity in the human body. He deals with two separate tendencies within the body of Christ. First, the common problem of Christians who feel inferior and insignificant because they have less prominent gifts. The apostle encourages such in verses 14-19.

A. The diversity of the Body: Solving the problem of insignificance (12:14-19)

For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? (12:14-19)

Here Paul deals with the problem of insignificance, the feeling that we don't really matter. I would venture to guess that the majority of us struggle with this. We say, “I like this church, but I don't think there is anything for me to do. I don't have the kinds of abilities that are needed.”

Paul uses the human body to make his point. Imagine if your foot said, “I can't do the things that the hand does. It is so flexible. It is hooked on to the arm, and it gets used all the time. If I could just wiggle my toes the way the hand wiggles its fingers, I would be useful. I really don't belong in this body.” That would be ridiculous, wouldn't it? That is the apostle's point. God's body is not one big eye or one big foot.

I was tempted to copy something my friend Ron Ritchie once did to illustrate this point. I thought about having a couple dedicate their baby this morning, but instead of a baby I was going to hold

a football, painted like a big eye, wrapped in a baby blanket. Now I don't see any gigantic eyes or gigantic feet among you today. That would be grotesque, wouldn't it? But it is just as grotesque when one or a few spiritual gifts are lifted up in a church and thought of as the only important gifts. There are no insignificant members in the body of Christ. Many of us struggle with this because we regard ministry to be what happens only on Sunday. So we think, “I can't get up in front of people and lead like so-and-so, so I guess there is nothing for me to do.” When we think like that we are basically saying that the church is an eye.

But, as we learned last week, every Christian has a spiritual gift, everyone has a supernatural capacity to serve others in the body. There are many different needs both in this body and in your world. The work of the church is to heal the brokenhearted, to give deliverance to the captives, to preach the good news to the poor and despairing, to encourage and strengthen people. We are to deliver people from the guilt and loneliness and misery of sin. All of that doesn't happen on Sunday. We come here to help get equipped for ministry. Only a few gifts function on Sunday, but the majority of ministry takes place during the week—in your home, where you work (which is your major platform of ministry), etc. We need a fresh understanding of the nature of the church. The work of the church is not going to meetings. It is the excitement of Jesus Christ living inside you, ready to walk with you daily through the hurt of this world, ready to touch people with his love, to bring healing and sight and life to the destruction we encounter all around us.

There are many needs in our midst—unemployment, financial needs, deteriorating marriages, etc. One of the great deceptions that has infiltrated the church is the idea that unless you have a degree in counseling, you can't help anyone. Now some believers have special training and background that I value, and I frequently refer people to them, but it is wrong to think that you need special training to help others. God has given you words of truth to encourage those who are struggling. Some of you have a quiet ministry of prayer for people in this congregation, for example. This is a wonderful ministry. There are numerous ways that we can encourage others around us.

There is an important place of service for you in the body of Christ. Don't worry about knowing exactly what your gift is before you begin to minister. Become involved in the needs of people whom God has placed in your life. Start loving them and caring about their needs and God will take care of getting you in the right place.

In the next verses Paul addresses an opposite but equally destructive problem.

B. The unity of the Body: Solving the problem of independence (12:20-26)

But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; or again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary, and those members of the body, which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our unseemly members come to have more abundant seemliness, whereas our seemly members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, that there should be no division in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with

it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.
(12:20-26)

This is the problem of an independent spirit. Paul is referring, not to those who think they are inferior, but to those who imagine they are superior. Some believers feel they don't need others in the body, that they can function on their own. Corinth was a richly-gifted church, with strong and dynamic teaching. There were gifts of prophecy and tongues. Gifts of healings were taking place. Some delivered people from demonic oppression. There was nothing dull about church life in Corinth. The trouble was that those with the more showy gifts became smug. They looked down on less obviously gifted believers. They set themselves up as first class Christians and treated the other members of the church as coach class. Whenever this kind of an attitude is present, there is jealousy and competition. This is what James says: "Wherever jealousy and selfish ambition exists, there is every kind of evil."

Paul reminds us here that not only do all the members have a part to play, but God delights to give special honor to the less showy parts. In the same way that we pay particular attention to the less presentable parts of our physical bodies, we should give care to those brothers and sisters whose gifts are not so prominent. Those who feel they are dispensable should be shown how valuable and indispensable they really are.

The apostle's point is that if those with less spectacular gifts are slighted, the whole church is impoverished. When he says, "if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it," he is not exhorting us to Christian sympathy. His point is far more penetrating than that. He wants the more arrogant members of the body to realize that if any member, however ordinary or average their service, is inhibited from making that contribution, "then the whole body suffers." If, on the other hand, one member is honored by being allowed to make that contribution, then the whole body is honored. The knowledge that the whole church loses if any member is not allowed to contribute was as surprising and shocking to the Corinthians as it is to us.

When we come to understand what the church is, as God sees it, then we will begin to have the kind of care we need to have for one another. We will stop thinking that teaching is the only important gift, or that one particular doctrine needs to be continually emphasized, and we will realize that God has made the whole body to function in a wonderfully coordinated way.

The human body is the most beautifully balanced and delicately articulated of instruments. All the computers in the world put together could not do what a single human body can do when it is functioning properly. Just watch a graceful figure skater, a slalom skier, a concert pianist. In the same way, there is nothing more beautiful and balanced than the church of Jesus Christ, his body. Spiritually, it is the most marvelous organism in the universe. Even the angels look into how we function. God has put it together, therefore we ought to care for each other.

In the final paragraph, Paul no longer writes with metaphors, but applies this truth to the church.

III. The reality of God's plan: The Church—Christ's Body (12:27-31)

Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second proph-

ets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? But earnestly desire the greater gifts.

And I show you a still more excellent way. (12:27-31)

We are members of Christ's body, and if we are to be effective in ministry we must learn to value what he values, to appreciate our diversity, and work with his methods and his people.

Paul is still stressing the diversity of the body, and exhorting us to remember that it was God who made it that way. And God has appointed various individuals with their gifts. Apostles were appointed to plant churches and write Scripture. Prophets received direct revelation from God and gave that revelation to the people of God. These two gifts were essential to the foundation of the church, but when the Scriptures were completed, these gifts were no longer necessary (unless we redefine the gifts).

Teachers, says Paul, make the Scripture clear. Miracles (a gift we talked about last week) were performed by people who did supernatural things to authenticate their spoken word. There were gifts of healings which we talked about last week, and gifts of helps, those who came to the practical help of people in need. Notice that Paul puts that gift in the same breath with the more prominent gifts.

There were administrations. That word literally means "pilots." It was used of the helmsman of a ship, who was responsible to steer the vessel and keep it on course. This is a gift of leadership. Then once more Paul refers to tongues, which we will deal with when we come to chapter 14.

Paul is making the point that not everyone is an apostle, not all are teachers, not all have gifts of healings, not all speak in tongues. There is a diversity of ministries, gifts and results, and all of this has been designed for one purpose: that the church might grow to a maturity where they will reflect what they were made to be—a unified, loving body of people who act as one body.

Paul exhorts the Corinthians, "earnestly desire the greater gifts." That was the problem at Corinth. They loved their teachers. They were impressed with their education and their intelligence. And they loved the showy gifts, especially the gift of tongues. But because of that imbalance of the dramatic over the ordinary, the whole church suffered because everyone was not able to contribute. There was jealousy and selfish ambition among them.

"And I show you a still more excellent way," says Paul, concluding this chapter. What makes a church impressive is not its leadership. It is love that impresses the world. The way to demonstrate the power of the Spirit in the world is not through the powerful exhibition of these more prominent gifts. It is not through impressive programs, as important as they are. The way to demonstrate the power of the Spirit is to love: bringing meals to each other when we are in need, mowing lawns, giving financial assistance, counseling and encouraging each other—those are the things that count. All the gifts of the Spirit are to no avail if they don't help us learn to love each other in tangible ways.

And the proof of this kind of love will be found in the extent to which we realize that we are all members of one body. Christians belong to each other. We share a common life. Let us demonstrate

this to the world by giving of ourselves in acts of service and love,
caring for one another.

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