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We Need Each Other to Be Whole 1 Corinthians 12:12-26
Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

There's an exhibit through January 5 at the Museum of Science in Boston that I have not been to and I probably won't see it because I'm a little squeamish. It's called *Body Worlds & The Cycle of Life*. *Body Worlds* is a traveling exhibition the museum calls a "truly unique opportunity to look within yourself and gain a whole new perspective on what it means to be alive. More than one hundred preserved human specimens reveal the wonders of human development and demonstrate how poor health, good health and lifestyle choices can shape your body. Whole-body plastinates, created from people who have donated their bodies for plastination, the advanced scientific technique invented by pioneering anatomist Dr. Gunther von Hagens, with the express purpose of educating future generations about health, teach us the story of our lives like no textbook can." All the body specimens are without skin so you can see the bones, muscles, tendons, nerves, blood vessels, and organs. As someone who didn't want to dissect a frog in biology class, I doubt I'll be going to this exhibit, but for many people who do go, I imagine it provides evidence of what *Psalm 139:14* says, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

I began with this illustration about the human body because today we'll be looking at the portion of *1 Corinthians 12*, where Paul describes how the members of the church are as interconnected as the parts and members of our physical body. In this passage, Paul gives us a picture of how Jesus intends us to view ourselves. It seems that in the Corinthian church, they'd become obsessed with the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, of speaking in a language that they hadn't studied or learned. It may sound strange to us, but this gift had become for them a test for whether you were truly spiritual or not. Last week we heard how Paul said that true spirituality is found in any expression or gift of the Spirit that glorifies God and builds up others. It's in this context that Paul gives this picture of the Christian church as a human body, which was, at the time, revolutionary.

"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. 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.

"Indeed, the body does not consist of **one** member but of **many**. 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. 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. 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? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with

greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. **If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.**”

While I likely won't be going to see *Body Worlds* at the Museum of Science, I'm sure it's a good tool for teaching anatomy and about the parts and systems of the human body. What's fascinating is that we have one body with so many parts and so many systems, yet these diverse parts and systems are working together in unity for the good of the whole body. The Apostle Paul writes that **these essentials: unity and diversity—one body with many different parts, working together for the good of the whole—are also true of the Body of Christ.**

How does a human body function? What is the relationship of all its parts? How does each part do its role and remain healthy? **The parts have developed interdependent relationships.** God's design for the church is that we serve like the interdependent cells, parts and systems of our physical body. What if the kidneys said, “We quit! We've been cleaning up around here for years and we're sick of it. Let someone else do it.” What would happen to the body? What if the lungs said, “We're tired of always huffing and puffing. Breathe out, breathe in, breathe out, breathe in—this is getting so boring; it's somebody else's turn.” What would happen to the body? What would happen if the heart said, “I'm important around here, this place couldn't function without me because I'm so strong and dependable. I'd be better off on my own,” and the heart set out to be all by itself?

God designed the parts of our body to function interdependently. God designed the church to function the same way, through interdependent relationships. This is what it means to be the Body of Christ. When we do ministry together as the Body of Christ, we become the hands and feet of Christ in the world today. Serving together, the ministry and message of Christ are communicated. When we fail to make our contribution, or when we try to do it alone, we hinder the ministry and message of Jesus because together we are His body.

There are several factors that hinder us from recognizing the importance of others and the gifts they have to offer and from serving interdependently as Christ's body. Some of those factors include our society valuing independence over interdependence, pride, fear of failure, anxiety we may be perceived as weak, low self-esteem (feeling we don't have anything to offer), competition, indifference, complacency, and most fundamentally a lack of love.

When Christ followers fail to serve interdependently, the body of Christ gets distorted and loses its power to move and do ministry no matter how nice the church may appear. A church may look good on the outside and be unhealthy on the inside; kind of like a man who went to a men's shop to buy a new suit. He tries it on in front of the mirror and notices the suit coat is a little uneven at the bottom. “It needs a hand adjustment,” the tailor suggests. “Just pull it down

with your hand.” The man does this, looks in the mirror, and notices the lapel keeps popping up. The tailor says it needs a “chin adjustment.” So, the man puts his chin down on the popped-up lapel to keep it down. Finally, the pants are too loose and the man’s told they must be pulled up by a “hand adjustment.” Although he’s bent over rather awkwardly and limited by these “alterations,” he goes ahead and buys the suit. The next day he’s wearing it for the first time, and he passes two men sitting on a bench. The first comments on the poor man’s physical challenges, the second one agrees and says, “Yes, but I wonder where he got such a nice suit.”

The Body of Christ can resemble the man in the suit bent over, unnecessarily distorted, not fulfilling its health, power, and potential because we haven’t recognized that we need each other to be whole. There’s a need for diversity if there’s to be a healthy body. We’re not all the same. We’re not all gifted in the same way. We have different temperaments and personalities. Diversity, not uniformity, is essential for a healthy church. This is God’s doing and part of God’s purpose. The one God who is characterized by diversity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) within unity has decreed the same for the church.

That’s why Paul says the church doesn’t consist of one member, but of many. To paraphrase what Paul wrote in *1 Corinthians 12*, if a member of the Fellowship Team says, “Because I’m not a Sunday School teacher I do not belong to the Body,” that wouldn’t make the Fellowship Team any less a part of the Body. If the Missions Team said, “Because we’re not Media Booth volunteers we do not belong to the Body,” that wouldn’t make the Missions Team any less a part of the Body. If the whole body volunteered to visit the homebound, where would our nursery volunteers be? If the whole body looked after the building and grounds, who would sing in the choir or participate in the Worship Team? The Deacons can’t say to those doing Children’s ministry, “We have no need of you,” nor can the Nominating Team say to the Advisory Council, “We have no need of you.” God has so arranged the body, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.

In our own body, it’s easy to see how we’re interconnected. Look at your hand. Turn it over. Extend your fingers. Make a fist. Open your hand. Blood, bones, cartilage, nerves, muscle, and skin are wonderfully woven together. In the Body of Christ, it’s easier to forget that we’re each a part of one body. **The perception of our physical separateness often prevents us from seeing our interdependence.** Paul says when one suffers, we are to suffer with them and seek to comfort and help them. That’s what Deb Quinones shared regarding our Caring Ministries. Caring for one another flows out of our relationships and recognizing our interconnectedness. What’s good for the body as a whole is good for us. We know for our physical bodies that eating healthy foods in the right portions, exercising regularly and getting enough sleep are vitally important and those things help the whole body. They don’t just help our arm muscles, or our lungs, or our digestive system—they help the whole body. In the same way, what’s good for the church as a whole will also be good for us, even though it may not be easy for us. What each of us does for the health of the Body of Christ is vital and needed.

Paul's point in *1 Corinthians 12* is clear: Christ chose each member to make a unique contribution to His body. Without that contribution, the Body can malfunction severely. Paul emphasizes that the less visible members (perhaps organs like the kidneys, liver, pancreas, and spleen) are perhaps more valuable and critical than other more visible parts. Although we seldom feel consciously grateful for them, they perform daily functions that keep us alive. When was the last time you smiled at your internal organs and said thanks for a job well done? Have you thanked your liver lately or praised your pancreas? Just as it's easy to take our health or parts of our body for granted, it's also possible to take other people for granted as they fulfill roles in our lives or in the church until something goes wrong.

We all begin life in a state of utter dependence, without someone caring for us none of us would have survived. As we get older, we begin to understand that we're not like everyone else, that in some ways we're unique. With that awareness, we begin moving toward independence and start asserting our own behavior and goals. Culturally we've made the mistake of equating independence with **maturity**. People who are mature **have** identified their uniqueness and difference with others, **but** we do not remain independent of others; rather, we recognize our interdependence. We understand that our effectiveness and fulfillment in life can only be achieved as we offer to others our uniqueness and receive from others their differences.

If we try to enter interdependent relationships without first understanding our own uniqueness or what we bring to the relationship, we'll remain dependent on others to constantly give to us. If we know our uniqueness and think we can independently accomplish more by ourselves, we're failing to see as God sees. We'll also fail to glorify God and build up others. Can the lungs make its contribution on its own? Can the hand assist the poor by itself? Separated from the body, can the tongue communicate the gospel? God has designed each diverse part of the body to be in an interdependent relationship with all the other parts. Diversity is not division. Our diversity as believers is part of God's design. Unity is not conformity. Unity isn't achieved by being alike. Unity is achieved by having the same purpose to glorify God, and build up others recognizing we need each other to be whole.

We're like the pieces of a puzzle. Each piece is needed, no two are alike. Each of you received a piece of a puzzle when you came in. It's a piece of the puzzle on the table in the lobby. We need each one of you to put your piece in the puzzle. There is no cover photo to go by because life doesn't work that way; we don't get to see all of life laid out before us ahead of time. Everyone with his or her gift has something to contribute for the good of the whole. You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Blessing: Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hand but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks compassion to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless now. Amen — by St. Teresa of Avila.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What are the implications that, as Christians, we are a vital part of a living organism, the Body of Christ?
2. The word “one” is mentioned six times in *1 Corinthians 12:12-14*, so one theme is unity. From this passage, what do you think the Holy Spirit’s role is in fostering Christian unity?
3. “Many” is mentioned three times in *1 Corinthians 12:12-14*. What theme does this represent and how does this interact with the theme of unity?
4. From *1 Corinthians 12:15-16*, what problems in the Corinthian church can you discern? Why would these issues be so divisive?
5. What specific challenge(s) do you find in this text to the prideful (those overvaluing their gifts)? What specific encouragement(s) do you find to the insecure (those undervaluing their spiritual gifts)? How do you think these issues apply most to our church setting?
6. How do you think this passage balances unity and diversity? 50/50%? 60/40%? 40/60%? Other? Why would some type of balance be important to the Christian Body?
7. In your Christian practice, do you value unity or diversity more? Why? Do you think you could be better balanced? How?