

June 11th: Body

Good morning again, everyone. Last week, we finished up our year-long sermon series titled “A Family Story,” thank you to everyone who joined us for that journey! Today, we gather to celebrate the incredible dedication and service of our church volunteers. As we reflect on the countless hours and tireless effort they have poured into our community, we are reminded of the selfless love and generosity that embody the Christian spirit.

Before we take a closer look at our scripture passage for today, would you pray with me?

*God who is three in one,
Even you are made of many parts, and yet one body, one holy being. You are Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, and we are your creation, redeemed by your love and sustained by your Spirit. We thank you that you are at work in and through each of us, and we recognize that we are able to do your work because of the gifts that you have given. Through you, all things are possible. Empower us this morning, breathe new energy and direction into us, so that we may continue to serve your beloved children. In your name we pray, Amen.*

I know I said we were all done with our sermon series for the year, but we’re taking one last look at the Letter to the Romans today, because it was just too perfect for our Volunteer Sunday.

As we already know, the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the early church in the hopes that his encouragement and advice would give them clarity and direction in their times of trial. The leaders of this congregation are dealing with a diverse community—diverse in terms of ethnicity, religious background, language, life experience, gender, and expectations—so it makes sense that this community would also be diverse in terms of individual gifts and skills.

We see that Paul brings up a similar subject in a letter to another early Church—the one planted in the Greek city of Corinth. Paul had so much to say

to this particular congregation that we have an official record of two letters sent to them, but scholars estimate that two additional letters could have been sent back and forth between Paul and his friends.

In both these letters to the Romans and the Corinthians, Paul uses the language of a body to further describe the desired relationship between these diverse people. He begins this section of his letter with this piece of advice, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.” He continues in verses 4 and 5 with this statement: “For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”

I like this reminder that we don’t all have the same function, and that function doesn’t have any bearing on belonging. Everyone, regardless of their function, belongs to the body. That means that there doesn’t have to be competition between the parts of the whole, or that the different functions are allowed to look down on each other.

If you’ve read through the New Testament before, you might know that the Corinthians text is more often used on days like this one. That text takes this understanding of different functions in the body and uses the metaphor of body parts to further illustrate this point. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:15-17, “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. 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. 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?”

This is all well and good, but I actually prefer the way that Paul approaches this subject in his letter to the Romans, because it names specific ways that individuals can contribute rather than just relying on the metaphor of being a

toe or being an elbow. Even in the best of circumstances, no one really wants to be a toe. Even a big toe.

In this passage from the letter to the church in Rome, Paul begins to talk about what we now call “spiritual gifts.” He also shares about spiritual gifts in the letter to the church in Corinth, so we see that this message is consistent to all disciples of Jesus in all contexts and all time periods. Paul is clear: each of us should strive to serve in ways that reflect our own abilities.

In verses 6 through 8, he describes different roles that individuals could take on within the church and the greater community, saying, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.”

I actually find this very comforting as a person whose whole job is professional ministry and I’ll tell you why.

I think our modern culture tells us that we have to be good at everything all the time. Have any of you ever felt this way?

As children and youth, I think we’re often told that we have to excel academically, be a superstar athlete, volunteer on the weekends, and make those college applications as well-rounded and impressive as possible. Or we have to have all of our ducks in a row to get the career we want. As adults, we often find ourselves juggling a lot of different roles—our job, our commitments as a spouse or parent, our responsibilities to our extended families, our friends, our places of worship, our hobbies, our kids’ hobbies, and whatever else that is on our plates. Not to mention any spiritual pursuits we might desire like finding time to practice generosity, or pray every once in a while, or maybe read the Bible if there’s extra energy. Add on doing the laundry, cooking three meals a day, and occasionally vacuuming, and you have a recipe for

physical, mental, and spiritual burnout. From my own experience, I've determined that being able to do everything, all the time, with excellence, is just not possible. If you have somehow figured out how to balance all of this—and you manage to not have a pile of dirty clothes on your floor, please come talk to me after the service, I need to know how you do it. For real. I'm desperate.

I don't think Paul was worried about vacuuming or driving the kids to soccer practice, but I think he does know that it can be exhausting trying to try to accomplish it all. Even from his vantage point of two thousand years ago, I bet that Paul's earliest Christian communities are also aware of this reality. I bet these first churches were full of people who knew that it can be overwhelming to try and take on all those tasks and roles—we can feel weighed down by the expectations and the pressure of it all. It can seem like the work never ends, the labor is always overwhelming, there is always more to do and more to be.

But there's some great news—being good at everything all the time is not what God asks of us or will ever ask of us. As disciples of Jesus, we aren't required to be superhuman and able to do all the tasks at once. As members of a spiritual community, we aren't expected to function as an eye and an ear and a leg—that would make for a pretty messed up body. As leaders, we don't have to be prophets, and priests, and preachers at the same time. That was never God's intent when we were created for mutuality and life together.

So the pressure that we feel? Those expectations that weigh heavy on us? The ambition to be perfect at everything we attempt?

We can set that down. We can take a deep breath and release those anxieties. Today, this text is an invitation to remember our true place within the Body of Christ.

I admit that I forget this sometimes, and therefore I don't do a good job modeling it for all of you. Especially in the rush of busy days and busy weeks, I admit that sometimes I believe the lie, and yes, it is a lie, that I must be able to do it all in order to be good at my vocation. When I lose sight of the good news

that Paul talks about, I sometimes believe that if I'm not capable, if I'm not competent, if I'm not excelling, I won't be valued or appreciated or loved.

Again, this is a lie. This is not what God wants any of us to believe. And sometimes it takes passages like this to remind me of the truth. It takes meditating on this good news for me to come back to myself and my own roles in this community and this world.

However, you might be sitting in this sanctuary and wondering to yourself: ok, once I've convinced myself that I don't have to be EVERYTHING, what is the next step? How do I know what my gifts are? How do I know which role or which job or which act of service is right for me? How can I know what to focus our time and energy on?

Unfortunately, Paul does not give us a step by step guide to figure these questions out. And that might feel frustrating, if we're used to seeing the Bible as a big book of advice for every situation. But I think the reason that Paul doesn't give us specific instructions on this topic is because each disciple has to do this work of discovering our individual gifts for themselves. Each disciple has to look inward to their own experiences, their own history, their own passions, and use their own intuition to come up with those answers. Each disciple then takes those insights and looks for ways to make use of those gifts in their own context, and these gifts and these contexts may shift over time. Your passions might shift, you might learn a new skill, you might join a new community—all of those things can be part of growing and learning over time.

One piece of guidance that could help each of us discover our unique physical and spiritual gifts comes from the theologian Frederick Buechner. He famously wrote, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Let me repeat that so it can sink in: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

My friends, all of us are invited to find out where our true deep gladness lies. All of us are invited to discover where the deep hunger exists in our community. This week, I invite you to meditate on those two things, and I hope that you will be given some clarity about what your personal next steps could look like. Maybe you're already aware of your deep gladness, and are just looking for people and places that are in need of what you have to give. Maybe you're already aware of the deep hunger in your neighborhood and you're searching for how to help. Maybe you've found both are just waiting for a sign to get started. Wherever you are this morning in your journey, this text is your invitation.

Together we'll learn that our individual bodies may be limited, but the work that we are capable of as the Body of Christ is bigger than we could ever imagine. We might have all kinds of different skills and passions and energy levels, but we come together as pieces of the puzzle to form a vision and a community that makes room for everyone. We don't have to be anything other than our truest selves, and God takes care of the rest.

Amen.