

Sermon Series: The Church
Sermon Title: Caring for One Another
1 Corinthians 12:12-26

by David Hockett
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No, it's not a mistake. If you were here last week you know that Pastor Jeff reflected upon this very same passage.

He reminded us that together we are members of Christ's body, that Christ is the head of the body, and that each of us are uniquely gifted by the Spirit for the work of being the Church in and for the world. Not only are we gifted but each member is him or herself a gift. There are no no unimportant members in the body of Christ. And we need each and every member for the the body to be fully engaged in the mission of the Church to love our community and invite others to discover life in Christ. Only when each member of the body is sharing in this work will we be fruitful and effective. Paul puts it this way, "For just as the body is one and has many 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...and as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as God chose." (1 Corinthians 12:12-13b, 18) You, church, you are the body of Christ, and each one of us is an indispensable member that makes the body healthy, fruitful, and whole.

This morning we turn our attention to the last few verses in the text where Paul makes a slight turn that has, I think, profound implications for our life together as Church. Eugene Peterson puts them this way in his translation *The Message*.

"The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don't, the parts we see and the parts we don't. If one part hurts or suffers, every other part is involved in the hurt and suffering, *and* in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the rejoicing." (1 Corinthians 12:24-26)

You know the metaphor really works. It doesn't need a lot of explanation. You know this, you've experienced it in your own body. "Often, when any part of your body suffers, even if it's a it's a small part of your body, the whole body suffers.

As Richard Hays notes in his commentary on Corinthians, we all actually know that an ear ache, or a sore throat, or a twisted ankle can define your whole day: the suffering of one part of the body really does make the entire body suffer."¹ You catch a cold, develop a little congestion, maybe a headache and the whole day or a few days just go south.

You can break a tiny bone in your foot and before you know it the limp, caused by your injury, has your hip hurting and maybe your back. And thus, Paul says it is with the body of Christ, the

¹ Lauren Winner, *The Hardest Question*. January 21, 2013.

Church. “If one part hurts or suffers, every other part is involved in the hurt and suffering...”.

And yet, as Lauren Winner has imagined, there is also a place “...where the metaphor may reach its limits (the limits being not a flaw with the metaphor, but precisely the way the metaphor confronts us). When I have an earache, the rest of my body does indeed naturally suffer. That’s the way we are wired physiologically. But when other people suffer—frankly, when one member at church loses a loved one I may not really suffer from that. When someone gets a cancer diagnosis, when we hear of family we don’t really know all that well having issues with a child—we may feel a pang of something. Occasionally a story will overwhelm us, maybe bring us to tears. But usually we’re a bit removed from the suffering of others. We’re not indifferent, exactly, but certainly not suffering with the suffering. So, Paul is telling us how it is supposed to be in the body of Christ, not necessarily how it always is. Paul is suggesting that in suggesting that in the body of Christ, we are to cultivate empathy – the ability to understand and understand and share the feelings of another. So, let’s say I am an eye. I am to do things Paul things Paul would say, as an eye, that make me open to the suffering of the hand. And very often, very often, we do not. Very often we remain buffered from the suffering of the rest of our body.”² Living as if it doesn’t really affect us. I don’t think it’s intentional, but it’s just the just the way we’ve come to be, the overly individualistic way we’ve ordered life together in the together in the Church. So how do we move from where we are to where Paul imagines we imagines we should be?

I was really struck by and challenged by something I read this week around Paul’s argument that if we are truly the body of Christ and individually members of it then there’s no way we can isolate ourselves from, avoid, or ignore the suffering of others. I dare say HIV/AIDS is not something that has come close to home for very many of us. Maybe some, but probably not a large percentage.

And yet, “AIDS activists, among others, have claimed Paul’s language, Paul’s metaphor of the body in an especially pointed—and convicting way, saying bluntly, the body of Christ has AIDS. That’s hard to hear much less say. Here’s what they’re trying to get at. When one person in the body of Christ suffers with a dreaded disease like AIDS, we all suffer with it. As Denise Ackerman has put it: ‘Paul describes us as the Body of Christ, a body that though it has many members, is one body . . . The picture here is one of solidarity in suffering, of mutual support, and of a moral community living in relation with one another and with God, practicing an embodied ethic of resistance to suffering and affirmation in the face of it. Paul really means it when he calls us the body of Christ. It isn’t merely a helpful metaphor. It’s sacramental.

Frederick Buechner puts it this way, "God was making a body for Christ, Paul said. Christ didn't have a regular body any more so God was making him one out of anybody he could find who looked as if he might just possibly do. God was using other people's hands to be Christ's hands and other people's feet to be Christ's feet, and when there was some place where Christ was

² Ibid.

needed in a hurry and needed bad, he put the finger on some maybe-not-all-that-innocent bystander and got him to go and be Christ in that place himself for lack of anybody better." God was/is making a body for Christ.

We really are Christ's body and as members of that body what affects one member affects all. Emmanuel Katongole has named this as an interruption. 'HIV/AIDS, and diseases like it, they are a radical interruption for the church...[and] it is only by being so radically interrupted that the church can offer any hope of healing..' In other words, if the church is going to truly be the church, to be a place of healing, and reconciliation, and salvation, the western church must stop thinking of the horrible problems confronting our far away neighbors, problems like AIDS, for example, as simply an African problem, as someone else's problem, as a problem we may be able to help solve by giving money. When the western church allows those assumptions to be interrupted by the pause-giving statement that we have AIDS, too, then we find ourselves in a moment of truly becoming church."³

We have AIDS too, because our brothers and sisters there have it. We are starving because we know there are children who are members of our body who are starving. We are homeless refugees because members of the body have been displaced by war, and hate, and terror. What else have we come to see as someone else's problem, something from which we believe our part of the body is immune and therefore we are untouched and unmoved by the suffering of our brothers and sisters?

I think about all those folks in Houston, and more than 1200 lives lost in flooding in Bangladesh and India – rich and poor, brown, black and white, lives turned upside down. Members of the body who are hurting, and afraid, and hopeless. "If one part hurts or suffers, especially those parts that we mistakenly think are less important, every other part is involved in the hurt and suffering, *and* in the healing."

One of the questions we ask as a way of measuring how well we are living into our mission of loving our community and inviting all to discover life in Christ is "Where is worship sending you?" That's probably a good question for us to wrestle with as we think about Paul's vision for how the members of the body are to care for one another. "Where is worship sending me this week?" Maybe it's just across the room to a brother or sister sitting on a different pew who you know is bearing a heavy burden and who needs to know they are not in this alone. Maybe it's across town to a community and a people not like you who struggle to put food on the table, or help their kids with homework, or cover the medical bills. Maybe it's no further than across the classroom or the hallway at work to that person who seems so lonely, for whom joy seems absent. Maybe worship is sending you somewhere a little further away? Maybe to a place that seems foreign or to a people or a culture that seem so very different from us. Perhaps worship is moving you to consider greater prayer and financial support for Faith Promise where we partner with a ministry like ZOE who works with children and young adults orphaned by AIDS and war in Africa, or the United Methodist Committee on Relief providing aid in Houston, and Bangladesh

³ Ibid.

and India. Where is worship sending us, to be Christ's heart and hands, to go and offer hope and healing in the name of Jesus?

And let's not forget the reason we go. The reason we risk stepping into the suffering and pain of others is not to fix them, or save them, or make them more like us, but to point them to the One who can fix, and save, and heal, and redeem.

The reason we as members of the body of Christ are willing to suffer with those who suffer is because Jesus Christ the very Son of God entered into the midst of our suffering, taking it upon himself and exhausting it on the cross. In his brokenness, in his wounds, in his suffering is the healing of the world. "Christ helps us," Bonhoeffer writes, "not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering...."

You know, "to know in the midst of the isolation that suffering often generates, that someone understands, that someone is with you, that is a significant source of comfort and power. Beyond that, God suffers because God is vulnerable, and God is vulnerable because God loves – and it is love, not suffering or even vulnerability that is finally the point. God can help because because God acts out of love, and love risks suffering."⁴ The reason we go to our suffering brothers and sisters, wherever they are and whomever they are, is because the love of Christ, the love that risks suffering, compels us to go. The question is not, do we care enough about our suffering neighbors to love them? Rather, the Jesus question is, do we love our suffering neighbors enough to care about them?

In a few moments we'll come to the table of our Lord and feast together on his broken body and life-giving blood. The Spirit gathers us here to be with the risen Christ. The body is remembered at this table. The Spirit also sends us forth from this holy meal to become for a suffering world broken bread and poured out wine, to be for the world the beautiful body of Christ. Where will worship send you to be Christ for someone this week?

⁴ William Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*. p. 18.