

I Belong to the Body

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Dysfunctional

Most of us are familiar with that word.

Simply put, it means to not function as it is supposed to function.

It is most commonly used to describe relationships.

Family relationships can be dysfunctional.

Marriages can be dysfunctional. Churches can be dysfunctional too.

But you cannot even recognize dysfunctionality unless you have some idea of how a relationship is supposed to function. This can be difficult because no relationship is exactly the same. We do not live in a cookie cutter world of relationships. No two marriages are exactly the same. No two families. And certainly no two churches.

But the Bible does give us various “pictures” of how the Church is to function. And each one of us is called to look at these pictures and then strive to do our small part in striving to see the church function as it should.

The picture for today is the body.

The Church is a body.

The Church is to function as a body, Christ’s body.

Read I Corinthians 12:12-27.

Take a moment to look at yourself. Look at your fingers. Look at your legs, your arms. Even think about the parts of your body that you cannot see: Your heart, your lungs, your stomach.

What if each of these individual parts had a conscience? What if each one of them could think for itself and could actually interact with other parts of your body?

What if your finger could compare itself to the heart as to its relative importance in the body? Maybe you are Mozart, and you give great value to your fingers.

What if the fingers could think of themselves independently of the toes?

And how might the toes feel when all of the attention seems to be directed to the fingers?

Or even more pronounced, how might the heart feel as it is so vital to any of the other parts of the body being able to function at all? And yet, who thinks about the heart?

But the parts of your body do not have their own conscience do they?

Your body really only has one conscience. That which is you.

And you only think of your various body parts as members of you.

You do not think of them independently.

A finger, being separated from the rest of the body, is absolutely useless.

Imagine chopping off one of Mozart’s fingers.

Even if it still had life, what could the finger do, separated from the body?

Without the rest of the body, the finger loses its significance.

As the parts of your body work together, what occurs is something greater than the sum of the parts.

And when we experience a problem with one part of the body, we soon discover that the whole person is affected. What if Mozart were to lose his ability think clearly? The fingers may still have the ability to play music, but without the mind being able to create the notes, his fingers would be pretty useless.

Every member of the body plays a role in the ability of the body to function effectively. But what comes natural for you in thinking of your body parts, does not come natural at all as you consider your own relationship to the rest of the Church.

No matter how hard we try not to, we tend to think of ourselves as independently working bodies rather than members of the one body of Christ.

Like most things in Christianity, we must work hard to train our minds to think differently about ourselves.

We need to discipline our minds to control them not to think in terms of finding significance as individuals. We need to apply effort to think ourselves in relationship to the whole body.

Are you ever angry with your thumb because he cannot point like your index finger? Do you get angry with your index finger because he is not working like your thumb? Hardly. You may want to see your finger function with more dexterity. But you do not expect your finger to function like the thumb. And if you injure a part of your body, do you immediately want to get rid of it altogether?

No, you take great pains to try to heal that portion of your body so that you can function as you are supposed to function.

Understanding the body of Christ does not mean that we no longer challenge ourselves and others to become more than we currently are. It just means that we allow for each member to grow according to its specific purpose.

I strive every day to grow as a preacher, as a father, as a husband, as a member of the church. I certainly strive every day to see more of the fruit of the Spirit produced in my heart. But I should not strive to find my significance in comparison to the person next to me.

It is helpful to recognize that these struggles are not new.

“Chrysostom acutely points out that the foot contrasts itself not with the eye, but with the hand. We are prone to envy those who surpass us a little, rather than those who are patently in a different class.” Morris

As a preacher, it is not with deacons that I compare myself. It is with other preachers. I am not as good as so and so. I wish I could preach like them.

The truth is that every preacher must learn to find his own voice, his own style, in preaching.

God does not want every preacher to be the same any more than he wants each of your fingers to function in exactly the same way.

If you take the time to look at our elders, there are variations in all of them.

The same is true of the deacons.

Sunday school teachers do not all have the same approach to teaching.

Churches often fall into the trap of trying to reproduce what has been done in the past rather than having the confidence that God wants each member to serve according to how he has gifted them individually.

So, here is the challenge. Think of yourself. But don't think of yourself as an individual separated from the rest of the body. Think of yourself as one member of Christ. Say to yourself, "I belong to Jesus. I am not my own."

Begin to believe that you are not simply one member of an organization. You are not one member of a community. You are one member of the body of Jesus Christ.

He looks at you in the same way that you look at your finger.

He sees you as you fit into his whole body.

He is not frustrated with you because you are not more like another member of the body.

In fact, he has designed you and put you exactly where he wants.

12 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.

Look closely at this verse. If you are following Paul's thinking, you would expect the last phrase to read: so it is with Christ's body. But instead, Paul shortens it to: so it is with Christ.

This may not sound very profound at first, but I believe it is.

On one level you can look at a part of your body and say, "This is my hand. Or this is my foot." But on another level, they are simply a part of you.

Paul is saying, "When Christ thinks of himself, you are included."

Look at the person next to you.

Do you look at that person's nose or ears as independent body parts?

Of course not.

They are simply part of what makes them who they are. You think of the whole person as a whole and the individual members only as they fit into the whole person.

But for some reason, we are skittish to think of ourselves in this way when it comes to Christ. I think we are afraid that we might in some way think of ourselves as divine.

Of course this is heresy. We are the creature. He is the Creator. And we will never become divine. But I believe our fear of even sounding heretical, squashes the depth of the wonder of who we are as belonging to Christ.

It is right to think of yourself in this way, "I am so united to Jesus Christ that I no longer have a completely independent identity. I belong to him. He no longer thinks of me as someone outside of himself. He thinks of me as a member of himself."

Jesus does not simply think of you as an accessory attached to him, like you might put on a ring. You are a part of him, who he is.

And the ring is a helpful analogy. The ring, remains a ring even when it is detached from the body. But a finger, no longer remains fully a finger when it is detached from the body. It is common in our day to think that we can still be united with Jesus while being detached from the body of Christ. To purposely detach yourself from the body of Christ is to also detach yourself from Christ. Christ, as the head, is united with his body. If the Church is to function again as she ought, then we must embrace that being joined with the Church is inseparable from being joined to Christ.

Far too often those who profess faith in Christ believe they can be united to Christ while walking away from the Church. The Church is the body of Christ. Picture in your mind detaching your finger from your hand and then trying to reattach it to the side of your head. This is what far too many Christians are trying to do.

If the Church is to function as she ought, her members must accept that it is not an option as to whether they be united to the body. It is fundamental to faith in Christ.

How could it be anything less than this?

For, the essence of being a member of Christ is found in God creating a new heart in you and then pouring into you of His Holy Spirit.

13 For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body –
Jews or Greeks,
slaves¹ or free –
and
all were made to drink of one Spirit.

The very essence of what it means to be in Christ is to have the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, indwelling our heart.

Again, we must be careful to meditate rightly on the metaphor Paul is drawing. Paul may be alluding to drinking the cup of Communion. But I would not press that too far. But I do want you to think about communion, and our practice of communion to better illustrate what Paul is trying to communicate.

When we have communion, we all have our own little cups. This is practical. It makes sense. But it does symbolically lose some of what occurred on the night of the Lord's Supper. Jesus passed around one cup. They all drank of the same cup.

Symbolically, we cannot really divide up the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is one. Just as you cannot distinguish the blood in your body. It is flowing throughout the entire body. That blood really connects all of the body parts. The same blood flows to each and every cell.

This is the way the Spirit works. You do not get your own little portion of the Spirit. We are all drinking of the same Spirit. And it is the same Spirit which is flowing through Christ, even as we speak. It is the Holy Spirit that unites us together.

Paul says that every member of the Church has been baptized into this one body of Christ.

I know that thinking of every member of the visible Church being members of the one body of Christ is difficult for some because not every member of the visible Church is truly saved.

There are members of the visible Church who have not truly been born again. They have not truly experienced the reality of the Holy Spirit in their life. There are plenty places in Scripture where Paul will challenge those in the visible church with whether or not they are truly saved.

Romans 8:9-10 ⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

This sort of reflection and self-examination as to whether the Spirit of God truly lives in you should be a regular part of your preparation for Communion.

But, once we understand that there will be a day when Jesus judges his people and says definitively who truly belongs to him and who have never really belonged to him, we are in a place to understand that the New Testament often speaks to the visible church, those included through baptism, as if they are all partakers of the Holy Spirit.

Theologians call this the judgment of charity. Paul does this very thing at the beginning of I Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 1:2 ² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

This is important because, God wants us to have tangible ways to think about who belongs to Christ and who does not. And baptism is the outward sign instituted by Jesus to make clear who belongs to him and who does not.

When a person blatantly walks into sin and refuses to repent, the church can cut them out of the Church through excommunication. Or if a person leaves the truth of the Gospel and no longer professes a sincere faith, they can be cast out as heretics.

But for the most part, we are not to be looking at other members of the Church and casting our judgment upon them as to whether they are Christians or not. We extend to them the judgment of charity.

To the elders of a church have been given the keys of the kingdom. Originally, these keys were given to the Apostles.

Matthew 16:19 ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed¹ in heaven."

But the elders are the ongoing office bearers. To them has been given the right to receive members into the Church and to cast them out. But the elders do not have the right to use these keys anyway they want. They must use them in accordance with the principles laid down

in Scripture. The elder do this with great humility as they too will be judged with how they have used the keys.

So, there is a place for self-examination as to whether you are truly of the body of Christ. But, there is also a place for accepting that because you have been baptized that you are a member of Christ's body.

You belong.

As a pastor, I know that members regularly feel like they do not belong.

They feel like they do not fit in.

They feel isolated.

They feel alone.

And during the current season of the coronavirus, these feelings can even be more pronounced.

You belong to Christ.

His Spirit is flowing through you.

The one Spirit of God is indwelling you just like he is indwelling the other members of his body.

Jesus is telling you that you belong.

You don't belong because you are the same as the other members.

You belong because Jesus tells you that he has a place for you in the body.

There is no member of his body to which he ever says, "You do not belong. I thought you might have a place, but really you don't. Sorry."

Listen closely to Paul's pastoral heart:

14 For the body does not consist of one member but of many.

15 If the foot should 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.

16 And

if the ear should 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.

Paul is a good pastor. He can hear the voices of those who do not think that they match up. He can hear those who say, I do not fit in.

Some don't feel they fit in because of cultural differences.

Some don't feel they fit in because of personality differences.

Some don't feel they fit in because of economic differences.

I am not like them. So I do not belong.

Paul's exhortation from Christ is this: You do belong! But more than belonging, Paul wants every member of the Corinthian church to know that they also have a useful purpose in the body.

Members often feel that they are not important to the body. There are only a few people in key roles that are really important. Not so, every member in God's wisdom has a role that enables the body to function as Jesus intends.

He says to every member, "You are significant."

17 If the whole body were an eye,
 where would be the sense of hearing?
 If the whole body were an ear,
 where would be the sense of smell?
18 But
 as it is,
 God arranged the members in the body,
 each one of them,
 as he chose.
19 If all were a single member,
 where would the body be?
20 As it is,
 there are many parts,¹ yet one body.

If all the members of a church were identical, the church would be a strange place indeed. Can you picture a person as simply being one big eye?

What if God has designed the church so that some members have more emotions than other members?

What if he wants some members to be more doers and others more feelers?

The variations of what members should look like are as numerous as the members of the body. No two members are the same.

And every member has a purpose. And it does not even matter if the other members understand the value of the purpose. You need to know how Jesus feels about you as a member of his body.

Remember what I said last week. It is a matter of obedience that every member is to be active in the Church.

But, the way in which each member is involved will look vastly different.

I always like VBS for this very reason. There are so many various jobs to do in VBS. Not everyone has the same job. But we all function together to serve in the greater task.

Life in the Church is not always so visible. But the principle is the same.

Up to this point, Paul has been ministering to the members of the Church who do not think they belong or are significant to the body.

Now, he begins addressing those who overvalue their role in the body.

21 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."

If we struggle at times to think that we belong or are truly important, it is also true that we can think of ourselves as essential and others "not so much."

The coronavirus has caused us all to think in terms of essential and non-essential. But as time has gone on making these distinctions has not been so easy.

Jobs that might have not been deemed essential at first, as time has gone by, we realize they are more essential than we thought.

One of the fears that I have as a pastor is that you would deem those who are involved in the livestream are essential, but those sitting at home are non-essential.

The truth of the matter is that God has designed the entire Church to be essential. It is not just that you need to hear the Word of God. Christ's body is not one big ear. You all have parts to play in the life of the Church.

I am not saying that it is wrong to be cautious concerning this virus. Here me in that. Especially those who are at greater risk. Caution is appropriate. But, every one of us needs to recognize that in as much as this virus has caused us to stop using our particular gifts in the life of the Church, it has hindered the overall work of the Church.

The Church is not merely the preacher and listeners. Every member of the church is called to be active in ministering in some way in the body of Christ.

Jesus declares to you that you are essential.
And those of you who think that your more essential than others, think again.

22 On the contrary,
 the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,
23 and
 on those parts of the body that we think less honorable
 we bestow the greater honor,
 and
 our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty,
24 which our more presentable parts do not require.
 But
 God has so composed the body,
 giving greater honor to the part that lacked it,
25 that there may be no division in the body,
 but
 that the members may have the same care for one another.

Paul uses two words that probably are distinct, but also overlap in meaning: weaker and less honorable.

Rather than trying to technically define these two terms, I think it is more helpful to think of them generally. It is easy for the strong “however you define it” to think of the weak as a drag on effectiveness of the body. You have heard people say, “A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.”

No one wants to be the weakest link. They do not want to be the one pulling the whole body down.

But that is not the way that Jesus wants us to think about the body.

I will use my daughter Ginny as an example. Let me explain to you how a day at the Amusement Park might work with Ginny. We have taken our family to Amusement Parks over the years. Not too often, but we have done so. If the goal of the day was to ride as many of the biggest coasters as humanly possible, Ginny would be a drag on the day. No question. But then again, so would Michael and Robin. Only Tara and I have the roller coaster gene. If Tara and I were to see ourselves as the strong, we would begin to think of Ginny as the weak and a true drag on our fun.

But, if we could step out of our own initial perspective long enough to see that God has given Ginny to our family, not to be a drag on the family, but rather to enable us to be more of a family, we would gain a completely different perspective.

And in fact, Ginny is the one who enables us to truly experience things in the park that I would not have otherwise experienced. Just a few examples.

- smaller roller coasters can be lots of fun, especially log rides.
- watching joy on someone else’s face can be just as much fun as having fun yourself.
- stopping long enough to enjoy meals together makes the day more relaxing.
- watching the shows can be lots of fun too.
- And ultimately, thinking about others and using strength to love others is more important than using my strength for myself.

Now, weakness comes in many forms. Just know that God has purposed weakness in the body. What is really cool is that sometimes the weak and the strong actually reverse roles. This can be seen during our current struggle with the Coronavirus.

On the one hand, it is fairly obvious that some in our body are at greater risk to the virus – physically. In terms of the body, they are the weaker members. And we should think about how to care for them and protect them during this time. One of the reasons that we have many social distancing guidelines in place is that we want as many as possible who are of greater risk to possibly be with us in worship.

But on the other hand, physical weakness is not the only form of weakness. Some are weaker spiritually. I will lump our children into this category. Some wonder why we would have VBS or want to return to a full Sunday School. It is out of a love for our children. We take very seriously their being trained up in the faith. Of course, parents have the primary responsibility in this, but the Church is there to come alongside the family.

So, there are different types of weakness. And as a church, we need to strive to care for each kind. We are to strive to minister to all of our members.

It takes great effort when you are strong to not think that the weak are hindering the body. They are not. They are designed by God to be indispensable parts of the body.

But this brings up another issue that I confront all the time in my ministry. I have members coming to me to let me know that the church is NOT functioning the way it ought to function. We are not this, or we are not that. I am told this because people want me to somehow snap my fingers and fix it. And I certainly am responsible for my part.

The fact is that the body is never functioning as it should. It is amazing to me that it ever functions at all. Every member of the body falls short of God's calling for them. Every member is dealing with life issues and personal sins that prevent them from being all that they might be.

As I get older, more and more of my body parts function less and less. That is just the way that it is. But Tara tells me that I am still functional. I am still able to most of the things that I want to do. I think this is how the Church functions too. The church could function better. As members we are always striving to function better ourselves. But somehow, Jesus continues to perform amazing works through his body. The Church is functional. And Jesus is gaining glory through her.

What about the less honorable parts?

Paul is probably referring to the private parts of the human anatomy.

But I think the point is that there are parts of the body that are naturally valued by the body and there are other parts that are not so easily recognized as valuable.

The person who designs and builds the sets for VBS is usually seen as more valuable than the one who take those same sets apart. But both are truly valuable to Jesus.

I used to lead work projects to West Virginia. One common issue that occurred every time was figuring out how to rotate people so that they all could have a shot at the work that they liked or maybe seemed more important to them. It was always fun to see how sometimes the perspective of individuals would change over the course of the week. They may have started out thinking they got the short end of the stick, but later grew attached to their job.

But what I always found interesting, was that the perspective of the team members was rarely my perspective as the team leader. I was thinking about getting the job done. I was trying to allocate resources in such a way that the whole job would get done, and done somewhat efficiently. I also loved seeing the skills of each member grow.

The point is this. I believed every job was valuable because they all played a roll in getting the overall task done. The person who drove to the store to get a supply we did not have was just as valuable as the person who put that part in its place.

Jesus cares that we value each other. He cares that we love each other. He wants us to give value to each other in the body. If you see something lacking in the body of Christ, maybe it is because you are the one God is calling to help that portion of the body function better. Don't get upset at the finger not functioning more like a foot. Maybe you are the foot. Fight your tendency to criticize.

Take the time to tell another member of the Church their value to you personally and to the rest of the body.

I know in our family, we have often given thanks to God for the countless ways that Ginny has been used of God to pull us out of selfishness and make us better people, and a better family. May this be multiplied many times over throughout the body of Christ.

There is a third way that Paul uses the metaphor of the body to teach the members at Corinth.

26 If one member suffers,
 all suffer together;
 if one member is honored,
 all rejoice together.

When you stub your toe, it is not only your toe that hurts. You hurt. Pain is something that affects the whole person, no matter where it originates.

The same is true of good feelings. Every so often, one of the members of my family will give me a foot massage. I know some of you don't ever want anyone touching your feet. But I love it. And when I receive this massage it is not only my feet that are happy. It is my whole person.

Again, the body is connected. It is connected by muscles and joints and nerves and blood vessels.

Only, in the church, this feeling of another's pain or joy is not automatic. It is something that only occurs when we make a choice to be affected by our brothers and sisters.

It takes time and effort and focus to think about how your brother or sister is feeling and to enter into their pain or joy.

But this is what Jesus calls us to.

27 Now
 you are the body of Christ
 and
 individually members of it.

Application:

1. Love the Church – Christ loves his body.
2. Love other members of the Church – even those who are very different from you.
 - a. They are who they are by God's design.
3. Don't criticize other members of the Church – focus on your area of service.
4. Value other members of the Church – every member has a place designed by God.
5. Embrace the pains and the joys of other members of the Church.
6. Remember, you are spiritually connected to the other members of the body.

If we will begin doing these things, we will surely make progress.

Every church is in some way still dysfunctional.

But we can be a church that is becoming more and more functional.
In fact, Jesus is in the business of taking crooked sticks and drawing a straight line.
That's what he does.
So, if you are still a bit crooked. You are in the right place.
You belong to Christ.